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**STRIVING FOR VISIBILITY:
REPRESENTATIONS OF ELDERLY GAY MEN
IN CHRISTOPHER BRAM'S *FATHER OF FRANKENSTEIN*
AND ITV'S *VICIOUS***



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1. Introduction: A Look into the Situation of Elderly Gay Men in Our Society

It is an indisputable fact that the past two decades have witnessed a remarkable increase in the visibility of the LGBT community in the media. Even though early examples of such representations include Rex Harrison and Richard Burton's roles as an old homosexual couple in the 1969 film *Staircase* or Vincent Schiavelli's openly gay part as Peter Panama in the short-lived ABC series *The Corner Bar* (1972-1973), it was not until the late 1990s that media depictions of LGBT characters began to become more commonplace and truly popular: TV series such as *Ellen* (1994-1998) and *Will & Grace* (1998-2006) played a crucial role in this process; *Ellen* became particularly ground-breaking when the series' main star, Ellen DeGeneres, decided to openly come out as a lesbian both as a character in her series and in real life in 1997. The trend initiated by these sitcoms paved the way for more TV series featuring LGBT characters in the 21st century: examples include *Glee* (2009-2015), *Grey's Anatomy* (2005-) and strictly queer-themed series such as *Queer as Folk* (UK version, 1999-2000; US version, 2000-2005), *The L Word* (2004-2009) or, recently, *Orange is the New Black* (2013-).

Likewise, the presence of LGBT characters is also becoming more prominent in literature: over the second half of the 20th century, LGBT writers such as Christopher Isherwood (who published the critically acclaimed *A Single Man* in 1964), Edmund White (known for his autobiographical trilogy: *A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room is Empty*, and *The Farewell Symphony*, published in 1982, 1988 and 1997, respectively) or Sarah Waters, author of *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) and *Fingersmith* (2002), have broken into the mainstream scene, and award competitions such as the Stonewall Book Awards (ongoing since 1971) and the LAMBDA Awards (inaugurated in 1988) have

also contributed to the emergence of a more visible body of work on LGBT issues. One could even signal a similar (albeit less overt) trend in cinema –at least, on a mainstream scale–, with films such as *The Birdcage* (1996), *Brokeback Mountain* (2006) and *Milk* (2008) obtaining major exposure despite remaining, as of today, uncommon exceptions.

As the opening paragraphs of this introduction suggest, LGBT visibility appears to be slowly finding its way through present-day mainstream media: however, a great deal of work remains to be done. Though increasingly more common, portrayals of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people often neglect to address potentially intersecting aspects such as race, class and, especially within the context of my dissertation, age. While TV series such as *Orange is the New Black* or films such as *Staircase* do indeed address issues of race, class or age, mainstream LGBT portrayals normally remain, as of today, focused on white, middle-class, young or middle-aged characters. The same seems to hold true for portrayals in literature: among the (still few) novels that approach LGBT characters defined by their race, class or age, we find examples such as James A. Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962) and *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968), Christopher Isherwood's aforementioned *A Single Man* (1964) –which does deal with an elderly gay man–, E.M. Forster's *Maurice* (written in 1913-14 and published in 1971) or Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982). LGBT representation, then, is slowly becoming more popular and acceptable; however, it has yet to become properly diverse.

It is within this context that the contribution that my dissertation intends to make to the study of LGBT media representation must be framed. Last summer, I started looking for a TV series to watch and, quite by chance, I came across *Vicious*, a British sitcom that, as I shall explore in more depth in Chapter 3, recounts the life together of a

couple of elderly gay men. Not only did I find the series genuinely funny, but I also found myself surprised and, to a certain extent, challenged by its overarching premise: never before had I seen elderly gay men represented in a media product; this realisation caused me, in turn, to reflect upon the extent to which LGBT media visibility is truly diverse and representative of the different kinds of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people that can be found in life. When I had to consider topics for my MA dissertation, the figure of the elderly gay man immediately came to my mind and, curious as to why such portrayals were so uncommon and determined to draw attention to them, I resolved to write my dissertation on representations of elderly gay men.

In order to properly contextualise my choice, it is essential that we first analyse the situation of elderly gay men not only in the media, but also in society as a whole. The lack of media visibility regarding this demographic can largely be ascribed to the lack of representation experienced by all elderly people in present-day society, regardless of their sexual orientation: not only do we live in an ageist society where old people are discriminated against on the grounds that they are “second-class citizens with nothing to offer society” (Nelson, 2005: 209), but elderly LGBT individuals are, furthermore, neglected due to the commonly held notion that old people are asexual (Bouman, 2005: 144); this leaves the existence of older gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people largely unacknowledged. It must also be kept in mind that, broadly speaking, the current generation of LGBT individuals had to live their identities secretly due to social and legal repression: viewed in that light, it is only logical that, much like other contemporary LGBT people, elderly gay men remain invisible not only due to

media silencing, but also because they may conceal their identities themselves¹. After all, as Maria T. Brown (2009: 66) remarks, “LGBT elders [...] may choose to remain silent about their sexuality for a variety of reasons,” including involuntary silencing or, as Cheryl Glenn (2004: 15) notes, a “strategic choice” to resist a homophobic society. We, then, begin to identify factors contributing to the invisibility faced by this collective.

Apart from the widespread ageism that pervades present-day society and the lack of freedom to which they have historically been exposed, elderly gay men are further conditioned by mainstream ideals of masculinity, which they fail to fulfil due to both their age and their sexuality: as E. H. Thompson (1994: 13) remarks, “[t]o many people, aging is a negation of masculinity, and thus older men become effeminate over time,” a belief that operates even more prominently within the context of elderly gay men since, as Kathleen Slevin and Thomas Linneman (2010: 486) contend, “[t]he hegemonic form of masculinity is youthful *and* heterosexual” (original emphasis). Elderly homosexuals are, therefore, further silenced by the paradox of a hegemonic patriarchal ideological system which produces “symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them” (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 846). Mainstream society, consequently, contributes to the obscurity of elderly gay men from numerous angles, silencing them as old people while also rendering them demasculinised.

While it is clear that elderly gay men are discriminated against by mainstream society, the truth is that, to further complicate matters, a great deal of social rejection also comes from the LGBT community itself. As Brown (69) remarks, “in the LGBT and queer communities, working-age individuals construct cultural representations of

¹ The issue of sexual repression and secrecy will be approached in more depth in section 3.1, in which I analyse how such aspects are at work in the TV series *Vicious*.

what it means to be queer or gay or transgender and, by excluding issues of aging and older adults from these representations, they render the elders among that community invisible,” a situation that, in the case of elderly gay men, is further exacerbated by the notion that “[g]ay male culture, in many of its commodified forms, holds up as its masculine ideal the young, muscular man, even more so than in heterosexual culture” (Slevin and Linneman, 488). In other words, elderly gay men also fail to adhere to hegemonic standards of masculinity and beauty within the LGBT community itself, becoming victims of the “lookism”² perpetuated by younger gay men. Not only does this cult of beauty lead ageing homosexuals to be ostracised by people in whom they should find solace, but it also causes them to feel old sooner than their heterosexual counterparts: as K. C. Bennett and N. L. Thompson (1990: 66) put it, “[b]ecause of the gay community’s emphasis on youth, homosexual men are considered middle aged or elderly by other homosexual men at an earlier age than heterosexual men in the general community.” The lack of understanding between elderly and younger homosexual men can also be ascribed to the fact that, as Brown (69) stresses, LGBT communities “have traditionally been less intergenerational in structure”: finding itself structured into different age groups for the very first time, the LGBT community has yet to find a way to reconcile such co-existing generations while also enabling them to interact with (and learn from) one another. While it is expected that the LGBT community will become more tolerant towards its elderly members as new generations reach old age, the fact remains that present-day gay elders are being oppressed by their very own environment, confronting an additional load of psychological distress that cannot be overlooked.

² First employed in the 1970s within the fat acceptance movement, the term “lookism” is used to refer to the “discrimination against a person on the grounds of physical appearance” (see “Lookism”).

As can be seen, the lack of visibility experienced by elderly homosexuals in the media is a clear reflection of their situation in society at large, as they remain neglected by both heterosexual and LGBT communities. While attention is slowly beginning to be paid by American organisations such as SAGE (Services and Advocates for GLBT Elders), ASA (American Society on Ageing) and, in Spain, the Fundació Enllaç³, little is truly known about this age group: my dissertation, then, does not simply seek to pinpoint such a lack of visibility in the media; rather, it joins these societies in attempting to acquire a better understanding of the needs of elderly gay men while also queering the negative traits with which, as I have previously noted, elderly gay men have traditionally been associated. The research I offer here, therefore, is situated within the fields of Queer and Gender Studies, given its purpose to challenge often pre-established conceptions of elderly gay men, its emphasis on a LGBT collective and, as I shall discuss later on, the texts' radically different portrayals of issues of masculinities.

With reference to the methodology employed in this dissertation, it must be kept in mind that, as this introduction already emphasises, a considerable amount of the bibliography I will employ throughout the following chapters comes from the fields of sociology and psychology. While LGBT subgroupings such as elderly gay men are gradually beginning to receive more attention within the field of social research, they remain very much unexplored in the humanities, a lack of research that might derive from the lack of media visibility I have previously stressed⁴. My dissertation, therefore,

³ Founded in 2008, the Fundació Enllaç seeks to protect the well-being of LGBT individuals in situations of vulnerability and dependence, devoting a great deal of their attention to LGBT elders. For more information, visit their website: <http://www.fundacioenllac.cat/>

⁴ An exceptional case is that of the Grup Dedal-lit (<http://www.grupdedal-lit.udl.cat/>), a research group from the Universitat de Lleida. Even though their research revolves around ageing in various media texts, no attention seems to have been paid to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender elders.

seeks to pinpoint and, to a certain extent, palliate such a vast void in investigation, applying the information I have gathered in social research articles to the primary sources that I have chosen to examine. I would also like to remark that, despite being located within the fields of Queer and Gender Studies, my research will not be backed up by traditional landmark texts such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) or Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) due to their failure to consider an element of age that is crucial to my analysis. After all, as Brett Beemyn and Michele Eliason (1996: 165) argue, Queer Theory does possess the "potential to be inclusive of race, gender, sexuality, and other areas of identity [e.g. age]," yet often "[pretends] that [these differences] don't exist," a gap that can be attributed, once again, to the youth-centred nature of our society. My analysis, consequently, also constitutes an attempt to bring into relief the issue of age within the field of Queer Studies.

As the reader can see, I have organised my dissertation into two main chapters, each focused on a primary source that deals primarily with this demographic: in the first place, I will examine a novel by American author Christopher Bram entitled *Father of Frankenstein* (1995), which I chose owing to its elegant treatment of issues such as masculinities and suicide, while the following chapter will concentrate on the British TV series that first drew my attention to this topic, *Vicious* (2013-). My choice of texts is motivated by their apparently distinct, yet equally empowering messages: even though, as I shall explore, *Father of Frankenstein* and *Vicious* are rather different at first glance (the former is a tragic novel set in 1950s California, while the latter is a more light-hearted sitcom that takes place in present-day England), they both serve to prove the same point, displaying how, despite stigmas, in Anglophone culture elderly gay men

are capable of exerting agency, initiative and the resolve to confront a world where they constitute “the other.” My overarching thesis statement, therefore, is that, despite being a silenced and stigmatised minority, elderly gay men can be depicted in a positive manner as both texts show, an argument that I also seek to defend separately in their respective chapters. The different ambiance of the sources selected, moreover, serves to underscore the social relevance of the topic I am analysing while also pinpointing the diverse range of problems to which elderly gay men are commonly exposed, whether strictly related to their sexual orientation or universal to all kinds of human beings.

Before moving on to an in-depth analysis of the texts, I would like to emphasise that, despite their double exposure to ageism and homophobia, the portrayals of elderly gay men I seek to analyse in the following chapters are, to a certain extent, privileged by their white, middle-class status: after all, as Slevin and Linneman (487-88) note, “[t]he fact that [these men] are privileged by race and class provides them resources that most likely would be unavailable to men of color or those who are in lower social classes.” Even though class is indeed, as I shall examine, an important issue in both *Father of Frankenstein* and *Vicious*, the main characters still remain largely privileged by their economic situations and white status; a lack of insight that might stem partly from the fact that, as of today, there remains a need for more portrayals of this collective in the media. Without further ado, I will now proceed to provide my analysis of the two texts.

2. The Only Monsters Are in our Heads⁵: Masculinity, Dependence and Personal Agency in Christopher Bram's *Father of Frankenstein*

Written by American author Christopher Bram (1952-), *Father of Frankenstein* (1995) constitutes a fictional recreation of the final days of Hollywood filmmaker James Whale (1889-1957), a gay⁶ man who committed suicide at the age of 67. Born in Dudley, England, Whale became deeply involved in the theatrical scene after serving in World War I and soon became a stage director. It was precisely the success of one of his plays, R.C. Sheriff's *Journey's End* (1928), that led him to move to Hollywood in 1929. There, he became known for horror films such as *Frankenstein* (1931) and its celebrated follow-up *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935); he later attempted to disassociate himself from his horror projects by directing movies such as the musical *Show Boat* (1936). Even though Whale's success began to wane after the release of his anti-war drama film *The Road Back* (1937) and his career as a successful director lasted roughly only a decade, his horror films (notably the *Frankenstein* saga) have achieved cult status over time.

Whale's public persona was also greatly characterised by his open attitude concerning his homosexuality among his artistic circle. As Curtis Harrington, a close friend of his, once remarked, "[a]ny sophisticated person who knew [Whale] knew he was gay," even though he did not "[scream] it from the rooftops" (in Del Valle, 1996: 2). His decision to be open about his sexual orientation was strikingly unusual at a time

⁵ The title of this chapter is adapted from a quotation on page 225 in Bram's novel, when James Whale notes that "the only monsters [...] are here [inside his head]," referring to his mental health issues. On a more metaphorical level, it also refers to the prejudiced conceptions of elderly gay men which, as I shall analyse in this chapter, the novel elegantly subverts.

⁶ Even though, throughout the chapter, I employ the terms "gay" and "homosexual" interchangeably, it must be noted that I do so from a modern perspective: within the 1950s context of the novel, the concept of gay identity had yet to emerge and the adjective "homosexual" entailed clinical, negative connotations, apart from being detached from the capitalist tones the term "gay" often evokes now.

(between the 1930s and the 1950s) when homosexuality still constituted “a social sin punished by contempt and a loss of social standing” in England and the number of people arrested for homosexual behaviour increased in America (Tamagne, 2004: 134; Stein, 2012: 34). While there is no evidence that his sexuality informed his artistic production, the fact remains that James Whale was, at the very least, a ground-breaking figure, embracing his sexuality with absolute ease in spite of social prejudices.

Needless to say, Whale’s unusual ease in relation to his sexuality renders *Father of Frankenstein* all the more interesting: set in California in 1957, Bram’s story explores how the implications of Whale’s homosexuality coalesce with those of old age. In the novel, Whale struggles to come to terms with his decreasing agency after suffering a series of minor strokes: the reader’s attention is therefore drawn to the mental and physical limitations of old age right from the beginning, rendering the once successful and popular Whale rather vulnerable and, much to his dismay, dependent on his Mexican maid, María. Aware of his growing dependence on others, Whale continuously seeks to reassert himself in an attempt to prove that he is still in control of his life: his search for self-control reaches its highest expression when he decides to orchestrate his own death as a metaphorical film in which his manly gardener, Clayton, is to play a key part. As we shall see, Whale crafts a plan to get Clayton to murder him in what Mark Bronski (1999: 11) has deemed “a gripping, often shocking, contemporary Gothic tale of personal agency,” seeking to transform Clayton into his new “monster” and sexually assaulting him in the hope that he will react in a violent, homophobic manner. It is through this bizarre plot that a relationship between the director and his employee arises,

bringing to light the latter's prejudices concerning elderly gay men and showing how such ideals are deconstructed as he gets to know the retired director better.

Father of Frankenstein, therefore, questions in depth stereotyped ideas of both age and homosexuality. Such is the narrative force of Bram's story that the novel was made into the award-winning 1998 movie *Gods and Monsters*, earning Ian McKellen a nomination for Best Actor in a Leading Role. The novel, however, has remained largely unnoticed and unexplored: in this chapter, I seek to draw attention to the novel's elegant treatment of ageing homosexuals, arguing that it offers a positive portrayal of James Whale without neglecting to showcase the limitations entailed by old age. In order to do so, I will analyse three essential aspects of the novel: to start with, special attention will be paid to how hegemonic ideas of masculinity are depicted and deconstructed through Whale's relationship with Clayton. I will then examine Whale's struggle to resist the growing dependency entailed by his deteriorating mental condition and, finally, I will explore how his choice to commit suicide renders him as an example of agency and, above all, capable of challenging conceptions of what it means to be both old and homosexual. In so doing, I wish to demonstrate how, despite showing Whale's flaws, the novel is ultimately positive and empowering as regards the portrayal of his life.

2.1. Through Clayton's Eyes: The Conflicting Masculinities of Whale and Clayton

One of the most salient aspects explored in *Father of Frankenstein* is, without a doubt, how the hegemonic ideal of masculinity in 1950s America is both presented and deconstructed by Whale and his quintessentially masculine gardener, Clayton. As I shall

analyse in this subchapter, Whale and Clayton are initially depicted as clear foils in the novel: while the latter is young, heterosexual and essentially manly, the former is both homosexual and old, thus belonging to two groupings that have historically been emasculated. The fixed contrast established by the narrator, however, is soon distorted, and Whale is shown to abide by standards of masculinity that remain out of Clayton's reach. It is through Bram's subversion of such fixed principles that we get to see how alternative notions of masculinity can be redefined, thus reasserting Whale's figure.

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator is careful to highlight how Whale's masculinity is limited by a number of factors: apart from his age and sexual orientation, both of which are revealed at the beginning of Chapter 1 (Bram, 1998: 3-4)⁷, Whale is also said to have "returned home recently after two months in a hospital, where he was treated for a series of strokes" (3). He is therefore shown to be physically vulnerable and, above all, dependent on his long-time maid, María, who has now become his personal nurse. One could argue, then, that his status as an elderly gay man is further threatened by the notion that seeking health care conflicts with hegemonic masculinity (McVittie and Willock, 2006): after all, he is said to have rejected the possibility of having a live-in nurse (3) and is "afraid of [...] doctors" (16). Such is his disdain for them that he even criticises the treatment he has been prescribed to sleep: "The ridiculous pills they prescribe. If I take them, I spend the next day as stupid as stone. If I don't, sleep is nothing but fever dreams." (4). He is, in short, anxiously trying to reassert his waning personal independence.

⁷ Throughout this analysis, I will be using the Phoenix edition of *Father of Frankenstein*, published in 1998.

Whale is, then, perfectly aware of (and beset by) his growing dependence on others. As the narrator emphasises, “he hates how illness has reduced him to a problem whispered about by others, a difficult child, an embarrassment” (4). His words, in turn, reveal a sense of infantilisation that underscores his image as a dependent man. For instance, Maria often refers to him as “Mr Jimmy” (3), and her disapproving attitude whenever Whale interacts with young men renders their bond similar to that of a mother and her son, something Whale also pinpoints: “Bloody hell, Maria. I know what I want. Don’t treat me like an infant” (83). Though bitterly aware of it, Whale also partakes of this infantilising imagery at times: for instance, when his head is struck by sudden pain during his interview with film student Edmund Kay, he is said to long for “someone who could *cradle* him and take him home” (50, emphasis added), as if he was able to recognise his vulnerability⁸. Given these factors, it seems safe to assume that Whale is depicted as emasculated: these assumptions, however, are later subverted in the novel.

Whale’s status as a dependent elderly gay man is presented in stark contrast with that of his quintessentially masculine young gardener, Clayton Boone. At the beginning of the novel, Whale and Clayton do not know each other. The narrator, however, does not hesitate to emphasise the employee’s masculinity, introducing him as “the manly fellow doing [Whale’s] lawn” (8) and later highlighting his “stony, sullen masculinity that Americans found dangerous in juveniles but becoming in their soldiery” (15). Given these contrasts, it is no wonder that Whale and Clayton’s first encounter is far from satisfactory: attracted by Clayton’s “striking” physique (11) and masculine appearance, Whale introduces himself to him and tries to talk him into using his pool

⁸ The issue of Whale’s waning agency and how he strives to reassert himself will be explored in more depth in section 2.2.

“as God made [him]” (15). Whale’s invitation causes Clayton to lift “his upper lip [...] in disgust”: he seems to have identified Whale’s ulterior intentions, and Whale feels he is being regarded as “an old faggot, a withered fruit” (15). Through this scene, Clayton is shown to epitomise the hegemonic heterosexual ideology of a society in which the existence of elderly gay men is not only seen as alien, but even as disgusting.

It is not, however, until Chapter 5 that the narrator delves deeper into Clayton’s consciousness. Described as a twenty-six-year-old with “no wife or family, no house, no future” (61), Clay returns to Whale’s house to do his job and remembers the last time:

When Clay sees the pool he remembers that this is the job where that English fairy propositioned him last week. Well, didn’t proposition him exactly but wanted him to swim in the raw. Great. Just what he needs this morning, some old vulture getting friendly while he tries to do his job. (62-63)

By entering Clayton’s consciousness, the narrator confirms Whale’s suspicions: Clayton does indeed view him as an “old vulture.” Interestingly, his words evoke the idea of the “predatory older homosexual” (Knauer, 2013: 71), an archetype used to designate older gay men who seduce and convert young heterosexuals “into the fold.” Clayton’s image of Whale as a “fruit” is, moreover, reinforced by the fact that he is also English: “The guy had to be a fairy, only with Englishmen you never know where English leaves off and fairy begins” (64). Through his thoughts, Clayton brings to light the traditional dichotomy distinguishing American masculinity from English effeminacy, associating American men with “the rugged virtues” of the land and Englishmen with the “effete dandies of Europe” (Russo, 1987: 16): he, therefore, draws on a discourse that further highlights the distinct masculinities they espouse. Given all the aforementioned factors, there is considerable evidence to argue that Whale and Clayton are presented as direct

foils at the beginning of the novel: apart from the obvious gap in terms of age, Clayton also seems to be much closer to the American notion of heterosexuality than Whale. However, as we shall see, the truth is that they are more similar than one might think.

Even though Whale clearly fails to make a good impression on his employee at first, their relationship gradually becomes less detached: this change, in turn, triggers the gradual distortion of Clayton's conception of normative masculinity. While working, Clayton is invited to have a drink with Whale: though initially "resisting" (67), he accepts his invitation. It is then that Clayton learns that Whale used to be a successful filmmaker, the director of *Frankenstein*. Impressed by the discovery, he begins to view Whale in a more positive light, discarding the possibility that he might be homosexual:

Clay can't help looking at the old man more closely. Something about him has changed. His smile looks less senile, more proud, a secret pride. He's no longer a frail old fruit but has weight now, grandeur and importance. The man who made *Frankenstein*. And Clay Boone cuts his grass. (69-70)

From Clayton's hegemonic perspective, success is a clear marker of masculinity: Whale epitomises the idea of the self-made man, a model of manhood that, as Michael Kimmel (1996: 16-17) remarks, derives identity from a man's activities in the public sphere, including one's accumulated wealth, status or social mobility. To put it another way, the possibility that a "fruit" might achieve success in life is completely out of the question. Ironically, Whale abides by ideals of masculinity that Clayton technically fails to achieve: as Clayton remarks earlier, "you're married with a nine-to-five job or you're nobody. You're either one of them or a bum, a white nigger no better than a criminal" (65). At the age of twenty-six, Clayton has yet to fulfil such social requirements. It is through this contrast that a sense of respect begins to awaken in him: in fact, Clayton

even tries to justify Whale's seemingly odd behaviour, remarking that "when you get to be [Whale's] age, you can't help seeming a bit weird and creepy" (74). Not only is he surprised to have met a director, but he is also beginning to revel in his company.

From that point on, Clayton seems to feel much more comfortable with Whale: it even seems as though he starts developing a sense of fascination towards the filmmaker. Such is his newfound ease that he even agrees to be sketched by Whale, who finds that Clayton has "the most marvelous head [...] to an artistic eye" (71): in fact, Clayton feels flattered to be drawn by "not just any man but the man who made *Frankenstein*" (73). Even though he still experiences a certain conflict between his admiration for the director and his fears that he might be homosexual –for instance, when Whale asks him to take off his shirt so he can draw him (99)–, his suspicions seem to be allayed, to such an extent that he does not mind Whale's compliments: "You seem to have no idea how handsome you are, Mr Boone. Which makes you even more handsome" (100). Now that his perception of Whale is in accordance with his mindset, the possibility that the old man might be homosexual is remote, and a sense of fellowship is allowed to flourish.

However, Clayton's idea of manhood begins to crumble when, during one of his visits, María tells him that Whale is indeed homosexual (168). Upon learning the truth, he is remarkably shocked and, once again, denies a possible connection between success and homosexuality: "I can't believe the man who made *Frankenstein* is a homo" (169). As a result, his perception of the filmmaker changes again: when he shows up, emphasis is placed on the fact that "he is smaller than Clay remembers, and older" (170). The narrator delves deep into Clayton's consciousness in order to display how his image of the director varies in accordance with his ascribed sexuality. Nevertheless, Clayton soon

assures himself that he is safe from the director: according to him, “[Whale] looks too old or distinguished for sex, normal or otherwise” (170). Again, Clayton’s perspective shows how homosexuality and old age coalesce into a patronising, emasculated image.

However, Clayton’s perception of Whale changes again as they continue to work on their sketch. While discussing his homosexuality, the director hints that there are also homosexual soldiers in wars, a possibility Clayton instantly denies: “You must think the whole world is queer. Well, it’s not. War isn’t” (181). Whale, then, tells Clayton that he actually served in World War I. Clayton is not only startled to find that gay men can indeed participate in wars, but also furious, since his own experience as a marine was thwarted due to an appendix infection that forced him to abandon the corps in shame: as we are told, “[i]f a good bullet had done it, they would have patched Clay up and sent him back to the front. Because his own body did it, they dumped him out with a medical discharge” (127). It is, therefore, no wonder that “Clay is too stunned to hear a fruit has done things Clay feels *he* should have done” (181, original emphasis). Clayton’s hegemonic conception of masculinity is thereby challenged once again.

Whale even goes on to talk about a love affair he had during the war. While Clayton still struggles to reconcile the ideas of war and homosexuality, he is ultimately moved by Whale’s story: “It should be pathetic, disgusting, but Clay can’t help being moved. So many things that should be opposites, manliness and mush, war and perversion, barbed wire and tenderness, run together here. Clay almost envies the two men’s moment of closeness” (185). Even though he remains alien to Whale’s lifestyle, he begins to realise that the concept of masculinity is not as fixed as he believes it to be. Unlike Bronski (1999: 14), who remarks that “[c]ombat as a marker of masculinity is

[rendered] moot” in this scene, Clayton begins to understand that manhood might be a more fluctuating term. After all, he is also aware of how the idea of masculinity can be a burden: as he once complains to himself, “[t]he world beats it into you that you must be a man, a real man, then denies you the possibility to do anything except get drunk or fuck” (128). The narrative, then, shows how similar Whale and Clayton can actually be.

Their conversation culminates when Whale asks Clayton to accompany him to the reception of Princess Margaret, to which he has been invited. At this stage, it is clear that Clayton has taken a liking to Whale: in fact, upon leaving Whale’s house, he is said to feel “an unexplainable relief in knowing he’ll see [him] again” (188). Even though he remains startled by “the confusion of knowing such a man as Whale even exists, someone who evokes such a mix of fear, admiration, envy and pity,” the narrator stresses that “[he] does not want to avoid him” (189). It seems as though Clayton finds solace in the alternative model of masculinity epitomised by Whale: from his viewpoint, the director “screws up everything [he]’s been taught to feel about the world” (189), proving that the ideals with which he has been imbued (and to which he struggles to measure up) are mere constructs. Viewed in that light, Clayton seems to identify with Whale. He even notices how similar they can be when they attend the princess’s reception, where Whale meets many of his former colleagues, yet feels out of place: “[Whale] looks exhausted, and Clay suddenly understands. [...] He is like me here, Clay thinks, more like me than I ever imagined. Clay is overcome by feelings of pity, curiosity and protectiveness” (225). His burgeoning sympathy towards Whale shows his gradual abandonment of prejudices, causing him, in turn, to feel better about himself.

The deconstruction of the barriers separating Whale and Clayton's masculinities seems to reach its highest expression when they return to Whale's home. Overcome by his memories of the war again, Whale is upset: it is then that Clayton decides to get rid of his clothes as a way "to snatch Whale from his past" (240), trying to satisfy his desire to sketch Clayton "like a Greek statue" (236). One could argue that Clayton's decision to totally undress before Whale signals his ultimate approval of the director's masculinity: after all, "[a] body's nakedness can be of no importance after hearing what war can do to a body" (240). Interestingly enough, by getting rid of his clothes, Clayton also exposes himself as the potential object of Whale's homosexual, erotic gaze, thereby placing himself in a traditionally passive position before him. This scene, then, can be said to mark the ultimate subversion of the construction of manhood in the novel.

The problem is that, while Clayton does transcend his prejudiced set of ideas and comes to regard Whale as embodying an alternative model of masculinity, the director, on the contrary, has not taken the trouble to delve deeper into Clayton's mind. As Páraic Finnerty (2010: website) remarks, "[t]o a large extent, Whale fails to see beyond his conceptualization of Boone as an embodiment of the stereotypes of heterosexual manhood." As a result, he seizes the situation and tries to take advantage of Clayton: apart from covering his face with a gas mask from the war, Whale goes on to "grip Clay's shoulders" (243), "kissing the tattoo" and ultimately touching his penis (244) to trigger a homophobic reaction on his part. Upon realising that Clayton does not kill him straight away, Whale taunts him: "You're not man enough to kill me? Not man enough to feel dishonoured by what I did to you?" (246). Clayton, then, shows Whale how mistaken he has been: "You didn't do shit, except make a fool of me. I thought you

were a friend.” His words prompt Whale to regret what he has done, realising how futile his plans are. As the scene shows, Whale himself makes the mistake of oversimplifying Clayton and the construction of manhood at large, ignoring Clayton’s acknowledgment of his manhood and failing to see that they have more in common than it might at first seem. Viewed in that light, the scene offers the most eloquent example of how ideals of manhood are reshaped in the novel, to the extent that Whale himself is taken unawares.

All things considered, it can be concluded that, through a study of the models of masculinity provided by Whale and Clayton, the novel succeeds in subverting long-held notions of what it means to be a man. The stereotypical, yet apparently unquestionable contrast established between Whale and Clayton at the beginning of the novel is slowly challenged: we learn that the old, homosexual, English Whale represents ideals of experience and success that place him in accordance with hegemonic manhood, whereas the young, quintessentially manly, American Clayton fails to live up to the expectations that shape the lives of adult men. While the sense of understanding Clayton begins to espouse is not truly shared by a Whale who never ceases to see him as the embodiment of manly America, the novel does manage to distort fixed ideas of what makes or does not make a man, providing a picture of Whale as a perfectly valid model of manhood despite belonging to two emasculated minorities. As I shall discuss now, his alternative model of manhood is complemented by his struggle to resist dependence and privilege.

2.2. Battling Helplessness: Dependence and Privilege in Whale’s Life

As we have seen, Whale’s relationship with Clayton displays the extent to which notions of manhood are redefined in *Father of Frankenstein*, deconstructing hegemonic

assumptions regarding elderly gay men and rendering Whale's figure masculinised. The bond Whale forges with Clayton, however, differs considerably from the one he shares with his Chicana housekeeper, María. Having worked in Whale's house for over fifteen years, María's role begins to transcend the limits of mere housekeeping as the director's mental health worsens, gradually becoming his nurse. Their relationship, then, acquires new layers of dependence, a situation which Whale attempts to combat desperately in an attempt to reassert himself in spite of his limitations. By exploring the relationship of dependence that emerges between the director and his employee, I wish to display how, despite his privileged position, Whale resists patterns of dependency stemming from his loss of agency, ultimately leading him to consider suicide as a way to liberate himself.

In order to properly understand the relationship existing between Whale and María, it is essential that we also analyse his status as an elderly gay man with a limited social network. Whale's situation is characterised by the absence of a partner and even of his entire family: having lived with former partner David Lewis for over twenty years before abandoning him "[f]or the love of another man" (7) –a young French man called Luc–, Whale now finds himself alone sentimentally. He had previously chosen to abandon his working-class family upon moving to Hollywood in the 1920s. As he tells Clayton, he does not have particularly fond memories of his parents: despite acknowledging that "they worked hard to keep [Whale and his siblings] clothed and fed" and calling them "good people" (103), he also insists that "[t]hey never even noticed [he was] different" and had higher aspirations, taking him out of school and putting him in a factory at the age of fourteen. Given their different life aims, it is no wonder that Whale has become detached from them over time: as he reminisces, "I forgave and *forgot* my

parents long ago. They meant no harm” (105, emphasis added). The fact that he barely mentions his siblings (only in this scene) underscores his alienation from his family.

Even though one could assume that Whale’s situation entails a strong sense of loneliness and alienation, the truth is that he actually seems to revel in the idea of being alone: as the narrator stresses when recounting his failed relationship with Luc, Whale is “too comfortable with his solitude” (14). In fact, one could even argue that he has actually chosen to be alone in old age, given his aforementioned detachment from his family and his choice to end to a relationship of over twenty years. His independence, however, is irremediably limited as his mental health worsens, having no choice but to rely on the only person with whom he lives, María. It is within this context that Whale grows aware of his limitations and, as I shall examine now, attempts to reassert himself.

From the beginning of the novel, emphasis is placed on Whale’s refusal to rely on a caretaker. Worried about his mental state, David wishes Luc had been there when Whale suffered the strokes so that he would be nursed, to which the filmmaker replies: “I’m glad he wasn’t. I was drawn to him for his spirit and spontaneity. I would’ve hated to see the boy play nursemaid” (7). He firmly refuses to be seen as a helpless, victimised invalid, something he emphasises again when, as I remarked in the previous section, he also refuses to hire a live-in nurse (3). It seems as though he associates the idea of being cared for with the “white hell” he experienced in hospital (48): after all, both scenarios entail a loss of agency that he tries to palliate. Unlike other age-related events (e.g. the “empty nest” or retirement) that, as O.G. Brim and C. Ryff (1980) contend, allow for anticipatory assimilation that can mitigate their psychological impact, Whale is faced with a state of chronic dependence that entails “an enduring position of

powerlessness” (Hockey and James, 1993: 105). It is precisely due to his burgeoning dependence that María begins to adopt roles beyond her job as a housekeeper, becoming the nurse he refuses to have and causing their relationship to grow tense, particularly on his side.

However, it must also be kept in mind that Whale’s dependence is essentially physical, not economic: after all, Whale’s economic status is shown to be rather stable, something the director himself suggests when, in an attempt to sound humble, he tells Clayton that he is “merely comfortable” (69). As Toni Calasanti and Neil King (2005) put it, class is a key factor that can facilitate the ageing process, an aspect displayed in the novel: supported by his upper-middle class estate, Whale is privileged in that he can actually afford to hire a live-in nurse or care taker. In fact, his position is even more privileged in the context of 1940s and 1950s America: forced to redefine its policies as a result of an increase in longevity, American society began to regard elders “as a group of people with economic needs” (Miller, 2011: 5), and old age began to be broadly considered “an economic [...] problem that demanded management by a variety of professional groups” (Hirshbein, 2001: 1558). Whale’s choice not to hire services that might enable him to cope with his illness can then be viewed as an act of both resistance and agency: however, there is little he can do to stop his mind from deteriorating and, as a result, María comes to serve similar purposes even if she is hired in another capacity.

The changes undergone by their relationship are largely explored throughout the novel. As mentioned earlier, the bond between Whale and María becomes highly reminiscent of that of a child and his mother, a relationship in which the former is constantly supervised and frowned upon by the latter. A clear example, as I have noted,

takes place when Whale is overcome with pain during his interview with Edmund Kay, with whom he decides to play a strip game whereby the student gets rid of a piece of clothing in return for an answer. When María is called in to assist a suddenly sick Whale, it becomes clear that she does not approve of Whale's actions: "[Whale] lies there, catching his breath after the exertion of swallowing [the pills to alleviate the pain]. María has recovered from her panic and stands above him, stiff and *censorious*. With her round face, tight hair, and imperious little chins, she looks like Queen Victoria" (48, emphasis added). She then goes on to reproach him for being so careless: "I think you are crazy. Just back from the hospital and already you are chasing after boys" (49). Even though, despite her patience, María's views are indeed homophobic, her disapproval seems to stem mainly from her concern with Whale's health. Likewise, when Clayton is invited to pose for the portrait, María stresses the director's delicate health, asking Clayton if he will treat Whale adequately:

"Are you a good man?"

"Yeah, I'm a good man. Something make you think I'm not?"

[María] gives him a stern, indignant look. "You will not hurt him?"

The old senora is nuts. "No. I'm going to sit on my ass while he draws pictures. Is that going to hurt him?"

"No? No," she slowly agrees, closing her eyes. "I am sorry. He is in such a mood, he is so crazy after his stroke, it is making me crazy. But he is weak and you are large. I can't help worrying-" (96)

Given Whale's fragile health, María is beginning to forge a sense of protectiveness that clearly transcends her ascribed duties as a mere maid and turns her into a live-in nurse, exactly the kind of help Whale insists on eluding. Such is Whale's dependence that he needs to be walked to the toilet after waking up, since "he can't find his way without

María” (155). While Clayton’s bond with Whale slowly becomes one of admiration and respect on the part of the ex-marine, María seems to feel only pity. As she notes later in the novel when talking to Clayton: “[m]aybe I feel sorry for him? Maybe I think that if I take care of him, God will provide someone to take care of me when I’m old and sick?” (265). She goes on to remark that “[Whale] is like the family dog that one takes care of even when it is old and sick. You cannot forget it was once a good dog” (265): María’s words serve to bring Whale’s waning personal independence into stark relief, stressing the changes their work relationship has undergone since his mind began to deteriorate.

It goes without saying that Whale is also aware of how María is crossing the line separating her ascribed job and the duties of a caretaker. When Whale meets Clayton to sketch him for the first time, María stresses that, since Clayton is big, Whale “won’t need [her] help if anything goes flooey” (71), alluding to his interview with Edmund Kay. In an attempt to make light of her words, Whale describes his relationship with María to the ex-marine: “Been with me fifteen years. And very possessive. When they stay in your employ that long, servants begin to think they’re married to you” (71). Not only does he imply that María and Whale have developed a certain sense of closeness over the years, but he is also careful to emphasise María’s role as a servant, thus highlighting his social status while also undermining the maid’s position as a person on whom he depends. The scene, therefore, is very much in line with Hockey and James’s (159) view that class can be “a viable alternative source of positive social identity which can be drawn upon” in old age, helping Whale assert himself in front of Clayton.

Whale’s insistence on highlighting his control over María is also displayed when, in one of the scenes, he tells her to stop humming the song “Land of Hope and Glory”

on the grounds that he finds it annoying: however, he is actually trying to assure himself that “[i]f he can’t control his brain, he can at least control his housekeeper” (81). Interestingly, the scene takes place when returning from the hospital in a car that Whale had bought “for the long jaunts he loved to take alone,” yet the director laments how “[n]ow he has to be chauffeured everywhere by his own dour little puritan” (81). In a similar vein, he also reacts rebelliously when, afraid that he might have another stroke, María advises him not to meet Clayton again, leading him to “[want] to see the Marine merely because María opposes it” (84). Despite her constant protectiveness, María also finds herself trying not to step out of line. For instance, before going to bed, María entrusts Whale with the task of taking his own pills: weeks earlier, those pills had been administered by a nurse, and María is conscious of “how [Whale] hated that” (139). However, these concessions do not prevent their relationship from becoming strained: while they never truly quarrel, their bond is affected by Whale’s struggle for reassertion.

As we have seen, Whale is constantly battling his growing dependence, refusing to accept help despite his privileged position as a man who can afford it. Consequently, it is no wonder that he also wants María to remain in her former position in an attempt to convince himself that he can still hold his own. Even though his acts of resistance constitute commendable signs of agency in themselves, the fact remains that his health is deteriorating, affecting parts of his mind that stop him from being himself: through an exploration of his relationship with María, readers get to see the extent to which his personal agency and independence are being constrained. Conscious of the unstoppable nature of his condition, Whale is ultimately left with no choice but to acknowledge that he is indeed losing control over his life. It is then that, after considering suicide as a way

out on various occasions throughout the novel, he eventually decides to follow through with his decision to put an end to his life. As he tells Clayton in the gas mask scene:

“I am losing my mind,” he hisses. “Every day, another piece goes. If it’s not headaches, it’s a daze, a fog. Either sleepless nights or wakeless days. Time has come undone. I cannot distinguish past from present from fantasy. Soon there will be nothing but fog. Fog and helplessness. It’s no life for a man. It’s an infant’s life. A dog’s life. I need you to kill me.” (247)

Even though Whale has the economic means that might indeed help him confront his final years with relative ease, we are constantly reminded that his quest is essentially one of agency and freedom, capacities that he is irremediably losing. It is precisely in this context that his choice to commit suicide is validated, constituting his ultimate act of agency and resisting “the age prejudice which ha[d] grown so strong in [Whale’s contemporary] America” (Fischer, 1977: 195). *Father of Frankenstein* thus addresses concerns of agency and independence that are crucial to any human being, illustrating how, as Bram himself notes in an interview with Philip Gambone (1999: 100-1), his fiction seeks to explore “the parts of [a gay man’s] experience that are specifically gay and the parts of [his] experience anyone else could connect with, too.” The following section examines Whale’s plot to commit suicide in more depth, analysing how, as the novel unfolds, Whale undergoes a journey of self-discovery throughout which he realises that his choice to end his life must depend exclusively on himself: in so doing, he commits a final act of independence that, in turn, masculinises his figure once again.

2.3. “A Self-Made Death”: Exploring Whale’s Politics of Suicide

Whale’s situation as an increasingly helpless man who refuses to lose his sense of independence is, as I have stressed, crucial to our understanding of his choices in the

novel. Resolved to perform his final act of agency, Whale crafts a lethal plan whereby Clayton is to become his killer: however, Whale ends up undergoing a journey of self-discovery that leads him to comprehend that, if he intends to commit suicide, he cannot selfishly involve people unaware of his suffering. In this section, I seek to argue two main points: firstly, I wish to underscore the voluntary and rational nature of Whale's suicide; and secondly, I intend to analyse his decision as a strong act of agency that challenges prejudiced ideas of homosexuality and old age, rendering him in accordance with hegemonic models of masculinity. An analysis of these two aspects, in turn, will lead us to the concluding remarks on the novel's elegant treatment of elderly gay men.

Constrained by his limitations, Whale begins to entertain the possibility of death as a gateway to freedom relatively early in the novel. After suffering a strong fit of mental pain that brings his interview with Edmund Kay to a halt, he finds himself reflecting upon emerging memories of his past and, above all, upon his very own death:

He would die, wouldn't he? Death is the only alternative he can imagine to such pain and helplessness. The narcotic stillness stealing over him isn't peace. But he doesn't want death either. Not yet. Not yet. Only what does he need before this "yet" becomes acceptable? Late wisdom over the meaning of it all? The chance to see one more naked man? Only the last item is likely, but all seem poor trades for oblivion. (50)

Even though Whale already seems to regard death as the "only" alternative to his clearly precarious state of being, he is still reluctant to accept it, sensing that there is something he needs to experience before putting an end to his existence. His words, then, appear to foreshadow what is to become his journey of acceptance as the novel progresses: not only does the director eventually come to comprehend that, within his context, suicide is indeed a rational way of liberating himself but, as I shall also argue, he also comes to

terms with the past he so often tries to obscure. In so doing, he forges a code of honour that enables him to gather the courage to perform his final act of agency on his own.

Even though the passage quoted already evinces Whale's awareness of death as a possibility, it is not until his later encounter with Doctor Payne that he begins to seriously contemplate suicide. As he converses with the doctor, he learns that the mental condition that occasions his fits and reveries is essentially irreversible:

"But you seem to be saying that this isn't just a case of resting until I'm better. This will last to the end of my life."

And Payne, who has hardly looked at Whale during their conversation, opens his eyes a little, producing a confused look of sympathy that's followed by an angry tensing of his mouth.

"Yes, I suppose that is what I'm saying." (79)

It is then that, once again, the possibility of death comes to the forefront. Beset by the doctor's words, he muses to himself: "Then I should just go ahead and kill myself?" (79). As he returns home from the hospital, Whale continues to reflect upon death more seriously. Conscious that his mind will continue to "[disintegrate] into *more* fog and helplessness" (82, emphasis added), he is growingly willing to end his life to stop the process by which he is losing himself, concluding that "[a] self-made man deserves a self-made death." Curiously, Whale draws on the discourse of the self-made man again: in so doing, he evokes dominant masculine values such as independence, assertive and dominance, which are related to self-mastery and the ability to control one's life (Hunt et al., 2006: 645). Readers, therefore, begin to see how his choice to commit suicide gradually falls in line with hegemonic ideas of manhood, becoming an act of assertiveness.

While, despite his irrevocable condition, Whale still seems to “[consider] suicide from a great distance off” (82), a new plan comes to his mind shortly afterwards. After María advises him not to see Clayton in order to avoid a potential stroke, Whale begins to craft a suicidal fantasy whereby the American gardener becomes his lethal killer:

Whale sees Boone more clearly in his mind’s fractured eye: the fists like mallets, the dumb animal squint of his face. He seems irrational, dangerous, your classic American killer. Yes, Boone frightens him, but it’s exciting to be frightened by another human, sharper and more real than the debilitating fear of losing one’s mind to incontinent memory and hallucinatory pains. He needs to play with fire. He wants to feast with a panther, if only to take him out of himself for a few hours. And if he gets eaten, well, it’s more exciting to be eaten alive than to be slowly consumed by your own bad electricity. (84)

These lines illustrate the beginning of what is to become Whale’s bizarre plot, hoping to turn Clayton into an angel of death that will put an end to his deteriorating situation. His fantasies gradually become more serious as the narrative unfolds: one night, upon taking his medication, Whale again considers dying of an overdose, yet realises that “[i]t feels too much like the death he fears, not so much a coming of death as a slow failing of life, consciousness dispersing itself in sleep and dreams and oblivion” (140). Instead, he wants to confront death directly and violently: as we are told, “[h]e wants it to be sharp and hard, with a human face. He wants it to have a man’s face, brutish and dumb, with a wide nose like Clay Boone’s” (140). Even though one could argue that Whale’s mental idea of Clayton as “your classic American killer” places him in a victimised and emasculated position that further reinforces the contrast between English and American masculinities, the truth is that his plans are curiously consistent with masculine conceptions of suicide, attempting to end his life through violent methods instead of experiencing a depressing decline. As Daniel Coleman, Mark S. Kaplan and John T. Kasey (2011: 241) contend, “[m]ore men use lethal methods, including firearms,

hanging and jumping.” Such methods have, in fact, given way to the so-called “gender paradox of suicide”: as Silvia S. Canetto and Isaac Sakinofsky (1998: 1) note, “[i]n most countries where the prevalence of suicidality has been studied, females have higher rates of suicidal ideation and behaviour than males, yet mortality from suicide is typically lower for females than for males.” This gap is illustrated, for instance, by the suicide rates registered in the US in 2013: 77’9% of the cases of suicide documented were male, whereas the remaining 22’1% corresponded to female attempts (“Facts and Figures,” website). Whale’s machinations, then, are curiously in line with the generally more lethal nature of male suicide, even if, ironically, his plan involves someone else.

Apart from displaying how, despite his doubly stigmatised status, Whale abides by hegemonic standards of manhood, his suicidal fantasy also displays Bram’s elegant *mélange* of the visual and the verbal in the novel. The fantasy devised by Whale likens Clayton to Frankenstein’s monster, deriving imagery from the films he himself directed:

The muscles relax and the joints grow numb as mind separates from body, and here is the Monster again, not played by Karloff but by Boone. Whale is not surprised. He seems to have known all along that Boone is his monster, more authentic, more convincing than Karloff, without that actor’s stuffy personality to undo the seductive fantasy of brute force. (140)

Through Whale’s fantasy, Bram brings the ambiances of literature and film together. As Bromski (12) remarks, Whale “decides to ‘direct’ his last production –the creation of Clayton Boone as a new ‘monster’ who will turn on his creator and, ironically, set him free from both the past and the future.” The novel is thereby imbued with a sense of ekphrasis, a concept that, as William J. T. Mitchell (1994: 154) remarks, designates “encounter[s] of verbal and visual representations.” The ekphrastic nature of the novel is exhaustively explored by Vincenzo Maggiti (2003: 104), who maintains that “Bram

non lascia adito a dubbi sulla identificabilità della base cinematografica del suo romanzo: la sostituzione implicita dei nomi parentali –dalla *literary mother* (Shelley) al padre ‘moderno’ (Whale)– sottende anche quella del film alla fonte letteraria” (original emphasis). Whale’s plan, therefore, serves to underscore his personal struggle for independence as well as the novel’s intertwining of literature and cinema: his decision to plan his death as if he were shooting a film, moreover, can be seen as another way of claiming agency, drawing upon the filmic discourse that enabled him to make a living.

Whale’s plan to turn his employee into the monster who will rid him of his pains, however, eventually turns out to be nothing but a mere illusion that will not materialise. Upon failing to provoke a fit of homophobic anger on Clayton’s part, he admits that he is unable to commit suicide on his own: “‘I can’t do it alone! I don’t want to die alone.’ He gazes up at Clay, desperately. ‘To be killed by you would make death bearable. Even beautiful’” (248). He then goes on to acknowledge that he should indeed take charge of his own destiny: “You’re right. Yes. It is *my* death. My own bloody death. So why can’t I take it?” (248, original emphasis). Whale’s failure to complete his suicidal plot, therefore, leads him to realise that he cannot involve innocent people in his death and must be brave enough to confront it in an honest manner. His realisation lays the groundwork for the final stage of his journey of self-discovery, reconciling his past and his present in order to craft a code of bravery that enables him to finally realise his aim.

Once Whale’s attempt to manipulate Clayton is over, he sleeps and has a dream in which he is transported to the trenches he once inhabited as a combatant. There, he is led by Clayton to a pit in which he encounters the corpses of his former comrades: upon seeing them, Whale “is suddenly filled with guilt and regret, not because he surrendered

but because he's alive" and "feels no satisfaction in outliving them, only horror and shame and loneliness" (255). It then becomes clear that Whale suffers from what Emma Sherman (2011: website) terms "luck guilt," a more generalised form of "survivor guilt" whereby soldiers "[feel] that their relative good luck [is] a betrayal of those who were injured more severely." Even though, earlier in the novel, Whale states that "[his] relief [upon seeing another comrade die] was stronger than any grief" (240), he now confronts the feelings he has been trying to elude and forges a sense of belonging among his allies, "[lying] among them" and "shift[ing] down among their peace" (257). He thus seems to be reminded of the ideas of honour and comradeship by which he abode during the war. Even though, at the beginning of the novel, Whale deems the war-like idea of "Death before Dishonor" a "young, quaint sentiment" (14), his dream leads him to realise that, much like the war, his suicide requires him to place his honour above anything else.

Upon waking up from his dream, Whale is able to retain "the peacefulness" and "the clarity" he experienced in it and, as a result, "his head is startlingly clear, like the air after a storm" (258). It seems as though he had witnessed his ultimate vision, thus gathering the strength to carry out his plan: now, "[Whale] knows what he must do. He is confident he can do it. He knows how too. It seems to have been in the dream. The crater in no-man's-land was like the dark green eye of his swimming pool at night." After weeks of trying to elude memories of his past, he finally comes to terms with it:

It was to prepare for this moment that his past has been pouring into him these recent weeks. Against his will, everything came home to him, his fantasies, his childhood, his war, either in silence or aloud with Clayton, his life insisting on telling its true story before he declares it over. He has been breathing in the scattered pieces of himself, so that he may breathe them out again. (261)

One could argue, therefore, that Whale's past as a war soldier proves crucial to his self-discovery: viewed in that light, his final resolve to commit suicide is greatly informed by the same code of masculinity that, as I analysed in the first subchapter, challenged Clayton's hegemonic conception of what it means to be a man. Interestingly enough, the method he employs is, once again, in accordance with the lethal nature of male suicide. Since he never learnt to swim (259), Whale decides to end his life by drowning in the pool he built for his young ex-lover, Luc: as the narrator recounts, "[a]fter weeks of drowning in the past, it seems only right that he drown in the present" (259). He is, then, careful to choose a method that completely eradicates his chances of survival. The main difference is that, now, his suicide is further reinforced by a military code of behaviour that enables him to further his plans on his own while also underscoring his masculinity.

Having finally made up his mind, Whale writes a letter informing his loved ones of his decision⁹: as he remarks, "for the last months [he has] been in agony day and night [...] and any peace [he has] by day is when [he is] drugged by pills" (259). He then goes on to note that, while he has had "a wonderful life," the fact remains that "[his] future is just old age and pain." As he writes his suicide note, Whale realises that he has certainly had a good life: "[a]t this moment, he seems to love everyone and everything, even his life." These glimpses into Whale's mind emphasise the rational nature of his decision: it is precisely because he refuses to ruin such a satisfactory existence that he decides to end it while he is still capable of agency, thus performing an act of "relief from what has become the incredibly difficult task of living in his body" (Bronski, 11). His course of action is, then, consistent with the definition of "rational suicide" offered by the Society for Old Age Rational Suicide (website), who regard

⁹ The letter displayed in the novel is an exact replica of Whale's actual suicide note (Bram, 1998: 275).

suicide as “a rational and positive act” when “a mentally competent, very elderly individual has carefully considered the main pros and cons for wanting to stay alive.” While characters such as Clayton struggle to believe that Whale has been happy (269), the narrator grants us a more intricate picture of his psyche, depicting him as a man who, despite his status as a man belonging to two stigmatised minorities, continues to exert the sense of agency that has shaped his life and exalts his position as a self-made man.

All things considered, it can be concluded that Whale’s persona is yet further empowered through an exploration of his choice to commit suicide: not only are readers made to understand the rational and essentially self-assertive nature of his plans, but attention is also paid to how his behaviour blurs the barrier that delineates heterosexual and homosexual masculinities. Apart from constituting the culmination of the narrative, Whale’s suicide also testifies to the novel’s positive depiction of elderly gay men: by exploring different conceptions of manhood and the director’s struggle to come to terms with his waning agency, Bram queers prejudiced ideas of both gay and elderly people, ushering us through the life of a man capable of both resolve and agency. *Father of Frankenstein*, then, reveals itself as an elegant and, above all, highly subversive novel. I will now proceed to provide an analysis of the TV series *Vicious*, which, as I shall argue, provides a positive image of elderly gay men from a completely different perspective.

3. Awareness through Comedy: Sexual Repression, Financial Fulfillment and Camp Sensibility in ITV's *Vicious*

We're asking the audience not to laugh at these characters because they're gay or old, but because of their relationship and their views of themselves and the world. The fact that there are two older gay men is incidental. But at the same time that is one element which makes this unique. It's not our brief, but this could well help to change people's minds.

Sir Derek Jacobi (in "Sir Derek Jacobi Interview," website)

Provided by Sir Derek Jacobi, the opening quotation captures the seemingly peripheral, yet ultimately crucial social atmosphere that permeates *Vicious* (2013-), a British ITV sitcom created by Gary Janetti (*Will & Grace*, *Family Guy*) and Mark Ravenhill (known for plays such as *Shopping and Fucking* and *Mother Clap's Molly House*), written by Janetti himself and directed by Ed Bye (*Red Dwarf*, *The Detectives*). Set in present-day England, *Vicious* provides viewers with a light-hearted glimpse into the lives of Freddie Thornhill (played by award-winning actor Sir Ian McKellen, who, as I mentioned earlier, earned an Oscar nomination for the film adaptation of *Father of Frankenstein*) and Stuart Bixby (played by Jacobi), a gay couple who have been together for nearly fifty years. As a result of the time they have spent together, the couple seem to have developed a rather intense love-hate relationship: in fact, many scenes revolve around exchanges of insults and teasing between the couple, yet we are ultimately reminded that, despite their differences, their bond is essentially one of love. Throughout the series, Freddie and Stuart are accompanied by their long-time friends Violet (Frances de la Tour), Mason (Philip Voss) and Penelope (Marcia Warren) and their new upstairs neighbour, the 22-year-old Ash (Iwan Rheon). While much of the action stems from

their comic bickering, the premise of the sitcom is indeed ground-breaking: *Vicious* is the first TV series to deal primarily with elderly gay men and, as such, it is characterised by a marked social dimension.

It is precisely in this regard that Jacobi's words become representative of the series' social nature: as viewers, we are not supposed to make a big deal out of the fact that the show revolves around two elderly gay men; however, the sitcom must also be analysed in relation to the stigmas and repression it so directly approaches. After all, it is little coincidence that *Vicious* features two openly gay actors playing the main parts: both McKellen and Jacobi have acknowledged their homosexuality in public (the former came out in 1988 during a BBC 3 Radio programme in which he criticised the Section 28 of the Local Government Bill¹⁰, whereas Jacobi, though less vocal, did register his relationship when civil partnerships were introduced in England in 2006); McKellen is, besides, a renowned gay rights activist. In a similar vein, Gary Janetti (who is also openly gay) was responsible for *Will & Grace*, one of the first TV series to feature a gay man, Will, as a main character. Even the sitcom's theme song, The Communard's "Never Can Say Goodbye" (a 1986 rendition of the hit by The Jackson 5, inspired by Gloria Gaynor's take on the song), is sung by James Somerville, who came out as gay at a time of social upheaval regarding gay rights in the 1980s. It is, then, clear that the series is imbued with a gay-oriented sensibility: however, it is also our duty to regard Freddie and Stuart as ordinary, common human beings –after all, that is what they ultimately are. *Vicious*, consequently, reveals itself as a comedy with a clear social background, bringing us closer to an often disregarded part of the population.

¹⁰ Considered for approval by the British Parliament in 1988, the so-called Section 28 sought to prohibit local authorities from "intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality or publish[ing] material with the intention of promoting homosexuality" (Government of the United Kingdom, 1988: 28).

Despite being radically different from *Father of Frankenstein* as regards the overall ambiance (e.g. genre, medium and even setting), the truth is that *Vicious* joins Bram's novel in portraying elderly gay men as happy, resolute and very much capable of agency, thus queering prejudices pertaining to elderly homosexuals in a much more light-hearted manner. In this chapter, I seek to analyse how such a positive depiction is achieved¹¹: in order to do so, I will first examine the issue of homosexual repression in the past and how it continues to affect the lives of the characters in the series. Then, I will focus on the struggle experienced by the main characters to feel accomplished and live up to standards of economic fulfillment in old age and, last but not least, I will provide an analysis of *Vicious* as an essentially camp text, examining its camp-infused sensibility as a celebration of identity that is much in line with the sitcom's essence.

3.1. Traces of a Darker Past: Sexual Repression and Coming Out in *Vicious*

One of the most prominent aspects addressed in *Vicious* is, by far, the atmosphere of repression that many elderly homosexuals had to endure when they were young and how such limitations continue to shape their current lives. Even though, in the series, Freddie and Stuart often approach their sexuality in a humourous manner, reference is also made to the legal and social prejudices to which they were exposed in their youths: through such references, viewers are reminded that, even though we now live in a considerably more open-minded world, many elderly gay men have been

¹¹ At the time of writing this dissertation, *Vicious* only consists of one finished season broadcast in 2013. Even though a second season is currently airing in England, it is to be assumed that the episodes and scenes mentioned and examined here belong to the first one.

irremediably conditioned by experiences of repression. However, Freddie and Stuart's attitude towards their sexual orientation is ultimately positive, embracing their identity and disentangling themselves from the binds of society with an acute sense of humour.

In order to properly understand the importance of repression in the series, it is essential that we acquire an elaborate understanding of the history of homosexuality in recent times in England. The current generation of elderly gay men came to discover their sexuality at a time of restraint: as Gay and Grey in Dorset (2006: 45) note, "male homosexuality [in England] was illegal until 1967 and was presumed to be a medical disorder until 1973." Even though homosexual acts were later legalised by the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, insistence was laid on the fact that they could only take place "*in private*" and "provided that the parties *consent* thereto and have attained the age of *twenty-one years*" (Government of the United Kingdom, 1967: 1, emphasis added). It is, then, clear that the legalisation of homosexual acts did not truly entail a sense of social liberation in the gay community, as homosexuality still failed to be accepted as socially acceptable behaviour and repressive language was still employed. The aforementioned example illustrates the sense of restraint homosexuals had to face decades ago: it is, therefore, no wonder that many of these men remain conditioned by feelings of being stigmatised that, once embedded, shape lives (Brotman, Ryan and Corner, 2003: 192-93). It is within this context that the relationship between Freddie, Stuart and their ambience must be framed: while several decades have passed, the fact remains that their sexuality and their relationship were even seen as illegal, which is why their resolve to embrace their sexuality and form a stable relationship is still remarkably admirable.

While, as mentioned earlier, Freddie and Stuart normally seem to be comfortable with their sexuality, the truth is that they occasionally evince traces of the repression they once experienced. These issues are addressed right from the beginning of the first episode, “Wake”: the season opens with Stuart talking to his mother (a recurring gag in the series), to whom he has not come out yet. Their conversation revolves around the death of a friend of Freddie and Stuart’s, Clive. When Stuart is going to inform Freddie of Clive’s death, he tells him that his mother is distraught by a piece of bad news. It is then that Freddie brings up the issue of his secrecy: “Did you finally tell her about us?” Stuart, however, replies that “[he’s] still waiting for the right time” (01:36-01:43). The series, therefore, brings into relief issues of secrecy and repression from the beginning¹². Throughout the episode, the emphasis continues to be placed on Freddie and Stuart’s positive, yet sometimes clandestine approach to their sexual orientation. This mélange of ease and discretion is also evinced by the kind of language they employ when talking about homosexuality. An illustrative scene takes place shortly afterwards: having met their young neighbour, Ash, for the first time, both Freddie and Stuart find themselves attracted to him. Overcome with curiosity, Freddie asks Stuart if he thinks Ash might be “family,” a term that, as the Online Dictionary of Playground Slang (website) notes, is used by gay men and lesbians to refer to “people who are also gay.” Stuart, then, replies confused: “Oh, God! It’s so tricky to tell now. I thought Graham Norton¹³ was straight.” It is, consequently, obvious that they are interested in figuring out Ash’s sexuality, to the extent that Freddie resolves to drop hints in order to “work it out” (04:21-04:43).

¹² Stuart’s process of coming out to his mother will be dealt with in more depth later in the chapter.

¹³ Graham Norton (born 4 April 1963), an Irish radio and television presenter known for his comedy chat show, *The Graham Norton Show*. In this case, the joke ironises about his gay and openly flamboyant persona.

Apart from clearly contesting the generalised view that elderly people are, by definition, asexual, their exchange also entails a sense of shared secrecy denoted by the word “family,” evoking a language that, though not fully codified, does indeed reflect a certain sense of caution. Much of the first episode continues to concentrate upon their curiosity as regards Ash’s sexual orientation: for instance, after learning that Ash has been talking to a friend of his on the phone, Freddie insists on knowing if this friend is “[his] special mate” (07:03), whereas, when they introduce Ash to Violet, Freddie tells him that “she’s [their] friend” and goes on to stress that “Stuart here is [*his*] friend” (07:20-07:26, emphasis added), putting his hand on Stuart’s chest to further hint at their relationship. Even when Ash is about to leave the flat, Freddie continues to draw upon sexual innuendos, inviting him to “bring round here anybody [he] like[s]: boys, girls, whichever [he] prefer[s]” (07:53-07:58). Even though Ash is well aware that Freddie and Stuart are a couple, something he clarifies when he reveals that “[he’s] straight” later on (20:26), they continue to drop clues in an ambiguous manner, to the extent that Ash grows uncomfortable. While their unnecessary ambiguity becomes a key source of humour in the scene, it also brings to light the contrast between a generation of gay men conditioned by repression and an increasingly open-minded society. This sense of isolation from the world is further suggested by the setting, an effect attained mainly by the presence of curtains covering the windows: as McKellen himself notes in his interview with the *British Comedy Guide* (in “Sir Ian McKellen Interview,” website), “[Freddie and Stuart] keep their curtains closed to shut out the outside world. The serious point is that for much of their lives they had to live privately.” Reference is, then, made to a past of stigmas and secrecy right from the beginning of the series.

As mentioned earlier, the first episode opens with the news that a friend of their youth, Clive, has died. Viewers later learn that Clive and Freddie were particularly close, to such an extent that Freddie might even have been “the love of [his] life” (08:48). During the second part of the episode, a gathering is hosted in his honour: it is then that we learn more about Clive’s background as a homosexual man. Stuart’s opinion of him is shown to be truly positive: “I always thought Clive was so dashing, every young man wanted to be seen on the arm of Clive Sinclair, the most eligible bachelor in London” (11:11-11:22). We, nevertheless, learn that Clive’s life was seething with secrets when Penelope refers to his marriage: “I seem to remember a wife, wasn’t there a wife at some point?” (11:23-11:26). She then goes on to remind the others that he even had six children (12:38-12:42). Stuart, nonetheless, funnily makes light of the fact that he was once married: “Oh, that was ages ago, and it was only for nineteen years!” (11:27-11:31). The fact that Clive was married is, after all, consistent with a trend followed by other contemporary gay men who “[i]n order to live in safety [...] acquired a wife and had discreet sexual relations with men” (Gay and Grey in Dorset, 45): it is, therefore, no wonder that Stuart shows so little surprise upon being reminded of Clive’s marriage, further underscoring the reality of a generation who often had to sacrifice their freedom in order to ensure their security and resist the morals of a clearly homophobic society.

The gathering continues and, shortly afterwards, their new neighbour enters the flat, oblivious to the situation. Upon learning of Clive’s death, Ash asks Freddie if they were good friends, to which Freddie answers that they were. While the implication that they shared a deeper bond continues to be noted subtly, Freddie does not have trouble reading a letter written by Clive later in the same scene. In this letter, Clive expresses

his willingness to “leave everything behind to start anew with [him]” (14:28-14:31): it is at that point, however, that Violet sees the back of the envelope and realises that the letter is actually addressed to Stuart, to which the couple react with great surprise. Even though the scene, again, relies on their confusion as a source of humour, the fact that it occurs before their new neighbour (with whom they employed a rather ambiguous kind of language earlier) also displays the openness with which they approach their sexuality, displaying that, despite their sometimes codified way of communicating, they ultimately seem to be comfortable with their identities, at least in the face of the new generations.

The series, however, is also careful to highlight that, despite living in a relatively more open-minded world, elderly gay men are still subjected to the traces left by their past. In *Vicious*, the constraint deriving from this past is particularly evident in Stuart’s case. Despite having been with Freddie for nearly fifty years, Stuart remains hesitant to tell his mother about their relationship and continues to refer to Freddie as “his flatmate” (“Wake,” 21:52): it could be argued that these jokes evoke the notion that, socially, it has historically been “easier for two women to live together than for two men,” since it is traditionally “more acceptable for women to show affection and share the same living space” (Jakobsen, 1997: 74). Stuart’s reluctance to inform her of his sexuality often causes tensions to arise between him and Freddie. Apart from the aforementioned scene in which Stuart states that he is still waiting for the proper moment, the topic is also brought up at the beginning of episode 5 (“Dinner Party”) when Stuart stresses that he has been dropping “little clues” and Freddie sarcastically replies that “living with a man for 48 years” should have sufficed (01:43-01:48). While their dialogue serves as a gag, it also displays the reality of numerous elderly gay men who, despite having reached old

age, have not come out to their families: as Gay and Grey in Dorset (61) note, “telling parents of one’s sexuality [is] very difficult and many [do] not do so or even [delay] coming out until after their parents’ death.” Despite the social dimension Stuart’s secret entails, critics have seen his closeted sexuality as a clichéd topic. Gary Janetti counters such criticisms in an interview with the website *Slate* (in Thomas, 2014: website):

There was another criticism: that Derek Jacobi’s character [Stuart] isn’t out to his mother. Well, the joke is that he’s in his 70s, his mother is in her 90s. The joke is that his mother’s still alive, and he’s been dealing with this for 48 years. People of their generation didn’t come out, so it becomes a very touching thing. If I was writing a show about a 30-year-old man or woman, I would *never* make that the subject, because it’s been done to death, and we’ve moved past that. (original emphasis)

While Janetti does admit that the issue of coming out has been extensively explored over the past few decades, he also insists on emphasising that, from the point of view of the previous generation, the process of unveiling one’s sexuality generally remains a taboo, particularly within the realm of the family: after all, as Janis S. Bohan (1996: 205-6) notes, “many LGB[T] individuals frequently feel estranged from their biological families,” to such an extent that they “create families or kinship networks to whom their ties are emotional rather than biological.” This aspect is, in fact, eloquently illustrated by Freddie and Stuart, who are normally accompanied by friends and have little contact with relatives. Viewed in that light, Stuart’s secrecy is not only a source of gags throughout the series, but also an example of how repression continues to determine the lives of elderly gay men, showing how *Vicious* brings the comic and the social together.

Even though Stuart has been concealing the truth about his relationship for forty-eight years, he finally resolves to reveal the truth to his mother in the last episode of the first season, “Anniversary,” which revolves around the celebration of the couple’s forty-nine years together. At the beginning of the episode, Ash comes into their flat and their

phone is ringing. Since there is no one in the room, he picks it up and starts talking to Stuart's mother: it is then that, accidentally, he informs her that her son is organising an anniversary party, completely oblivious to the fact that she does not know anything about their relationship. Shortly afterwards, Stuart comes into the room and learns of Ash's mistake: despite growing furious at first, he comes to understand that the time has come for him to face the truth once and for all. As he tells Freddie: "I've made a decision about something, Freddie. [...] It's something you've been wanting me to do for a very long time. [...] I'm going to tell my mother about us tonight. It's time... don't you think?" (05:30-06:10). Even though Ash did not mention the exact reason for their celebration and even Violet attempts to warn him out of fear that his mother might react negatively against him, Stuart views it as the perfect opportunity for him to completely embrace his sexuality. As he tells Ash later on in the episode: "Actually, I'm glad you [talked to my mother], Ash. I've been putting it off for far too long" (09:55-10:00). Needless to say, his decision is supported and celebrated by his partner, who, despite joking that "[i]f he waited any longer [they] would have to dig her up to tell her" (10:00-10:03), also tells him that "[he is] very proud of [him]" earlier (08:49).

When Stuart's mother arrives at the party, she is indeed unaware of what they are celebrating, to the extent that, at first, she wrongly believes they are commemorating his son's birthday. It is then that Stuart resolves to tell her the truth: "My birthday is in October, and this party, mother, is to celebrate our forty-ninth anniversary. Yes, that's right. Freddie and I are partners" (12:58-11:18). His words, in turn, cause her to faint. Even though she is clearly shown to be shocked by the news, she seems to avoid the topic later when she recovers: when Stuart asks her if there is anything she would like to

talk about, she firmly emphasises that “[she] does not remember and [she] certainly [doesn’t] want to talk about it” (18:27). Through her words, it becomes clear that she simply wants to pretend she has not heard him. It is then that, unwilling to let Stuart’s effort and bravery go unnoticed, Freddie resolves to defend him and their relationship:

We are going to talk about it, and you are going to listen. [...] The man you are talking so disrespectfully to is not only your son, but my partner of 49 years. [...] And I’ll have you know he’s the most wonderful man in the world and I’m proud to call him my lover. [...] Yes, we’ve had a few major differences over the years but I can’t imagine my life without him. So when you talk to him, you talk to him with respect. [...] He cares very deeply about you, but unless you can’t accept him and our relationship you are not welcome here. (18:35-19:40)

Rather than reply to Freddie’s words, however, Stuart’s mother continues to elude the truth, congratulating them in a rather matter-of-fact manner and telling her son to call her tomorrow. Even though she does not react aggressively or discriminatingly against them, it is rather obvious that she does not embrace Stuart’s sexuality either: while one could argue that the scene ends on a clearly bittersweet note, Stuart’s resolve to face his mother after years of secrecy and Freddie’s defence of his partner prove that, despite the binds of a society in which their sexuality was stigmatised, they are ultimately proud of their identities, exerting forms of resistance that render them admirable and subversive. Furthermore, it is curious that, after coming out to his mother, Stuart opens the curtains, leading us to the end of the episode and, by extension, of the season: it seems as though he was suggesting that, by taking the final step to live his life freely, he does not need to hide any more, rendering their flat more welcoming and open to the outside world.

All things considered, it can be concluded that *Vicious* provides a rather eloquent exploration of the effects of repression upon the current generation of elderly gay men,

showing how, even though they continue to use codified language and even conceal their sexualities in certain cases, they are ultimately comfortable with their identities and live their lives proudly in the face of repression. Even though one could argue that Freddie and Stuart are relatively privileged due to their white, middle-class background and their stable circle of friends, the fact remains that they have managed to remain true to themselves and their love despite legal and social impediments: their determination to resist social conventions is very much representative of a generation of men that, though often repressed, have become survivors, paving the way for a less restricted society.

3.2. A Quest for Fulfillment: Financial Well-Being and Power Dynamics between Freddie and Stuart

Even though *Vicious* clearly derives much of its social relevance from issues pertaining to the sexuality of the main characters, the series is also careful to delve deep into other aspects of importance not only to elderly gay men, but to elderly members of society in general. One of the most salient issues approached throughout the episodes is that of how waning job prospects and financial unrest can affect the lives of people in old age. As I shall now examine, the struggle to feel economically fulfilled despite age is particularly eloquent in Freddie's case: having worked as an actor for over fifty years, Freddie finds himself struggling to find jobs as he ages, a situation that, in turn, causes tensions to arise within the couple. *Vicious* thus tackles issues of economic fulfillment in old age while also displaying how financial issues affect heterosexual and same-sex couples equally: however, as I shall also argue, it ultimately offers a positive image of elderly gay men, stressing how, though troubled, Freddie and Stuart refuse to give up.

From the beginning of the sitcom, reference is often made to Freddie's career. Characterised by his enormous ego, Freddie frequently revels in (and boasts about) his work as an actor. Such is his sense of pride that, upon meeting Ash for the first time in episode 1, he immediately introduces himself as Freddie Thornhill under the assumption that their new neighbour will realise who he is right away: "I'm Freddie, and this is my friend, Stuart. Freddie Thornhill. [brief silence] You'll probably recognise me from the television or stage. Do you go to the theatre often, Ash?" (03:32-03:41). Ash, then, admits he does not know him by remarking that "[he doesn't] go to the theatre much" (03:49). While, as his failed attempt to revel in his ego shows, Freddie has never been particularly successful as an actor (in fact, a source of humour in the series is that his biggest achievements include being elected the 10th most popular *Doctor Who* villain and a Smarties commercial with Judi Dench, establishing an ironic contrast with the success McKellen has attained in old age), viewers get to see the extent to which his job constitutes a key part of his identity and self-esteem from the beginning. His sense of identity is crucial when analysing the impact of dwindling job opportunities and, given his age, the looming prospect of retirement: as Liria N. Alvarenga et al. (2009: 795) note, work constitutes "an important element of personal identity construction," which is why a decline in professional activity or the end of one's working life may result in emotional distress and a lower self-esteem. While Freddie's case is rare in that he has a career as an actor and, as such, he is not expected to stop working at a particular age, the fact that his job prospects wane as time goes by remains at work, entailing a feeling of distress akin to that of retirement. His concerns are, moreover, linked to the couple's financial issues, owing to his role as the couple's provider as opposed to Stuart's role as

the homemaker¹⁴: their struggles, as I shall argue, show how “[l]ow levels of economic well-being may exacerbate financial conflicts as couples struggle to make ends meet” (Dew and Stuart, 2012: 43), becoming a recurrent source of tension in the series.

Freddie and Stuart’s financial struggles (and how they affect their relationship) are addressed in various episodes of the first season. A clear example can be found in episode 2, “Cheat.” The action initially revolves around Freddie’s upcoming attendance at a *Doctor Who* fanclub event due to his election as the series’ 10th most popular villain, an occasion that, again, enables Freddie to boast about his career. For instance, when he informs Ash of the news, he proudly inquires: “does something like that even mean anything?” Funnily, when Ash answers that he does not know, Freddie angrily asserts that “of course it means something” (04:32-04:45). Nevertheless, our attention is soon redirected to the financial distress experienced by the couple: frustrated because they cannot afford to buy a coat for the occasion, Stuart decides to start working in a clothing store. However, he decides not to inform Freddie of his new job: for instance, when he sets off for work later in the episode and Freddie asks him where he is going, he lies to him, telling him that “[he’s got] an appointment” (08:56). His secret, nonetheless, is soon discovered by the other characters: shortly afterwards in the episode, Violet and Penelope accompany Ash to the store where Stuart is working and notice him speaking to another man from afar. Rather than entertain the possibility that Stuart might actually be working there, however, they immediately assume that he is having an affair.

¹⁴ Even though, in the series, no reference is made to the reasons why Stuart has adopted a homemaking role within the couple, Derek Jacobi explains his character’s situation in his interview with *The British Comedy Guide* (in “Sir Derek Jacobi Interview,” website), noting that, impressed by Freddie’s status as a rising actor in his 20’s, Stuart “just devoted his life to him, looked after the house and finances and made sure Freddie’s ego was always boosted –which has been an absolutely full-time job!” Similarly, the series also neglects to consider aspects such as Stuart’s retirement pension and the extent to which it contributes to the couple’s economic well-being.

Curiously, Freddie reaches the same conclusion shortly afterwards: a scene later, Stuart leaves for work again and tells Freddie that “[he is] going to see [his] mother” (10:38). When he leaves, however, Stuart’s mother calls and Freddie learns that Stuart has lied to him, immediately assuming, like Violet and Penelope, that he is having an affair. As he tells Violet, who appears right afterwards: “I think [Stuart is] having an affair. [...] He’s been sneaking around for days and now he’s lied about where he’s going” (12:19-12:27). Even though Violet does not tell Freddie that she also saw Stuart, she does visit Stuart the next day, warning him that “Freddie knows [he’s] having an affair” (16:21). It is then that Stuart reveals the truth about his continuous absences, revealing that he actually works there: “Well, I wanted to buy Freddie a new coat for his screening tonight, but we couldn’t afford it. And you know how he needs to feel he is the one supporting us. I didn’t want him to know I’d taken this job” (16:48-16:59). He then goes on to remark that “Freddie must never know,” since “the important thing is that [they] let him keep his dignity” (17:13-17:18). Curiously, Stuart’s secrecy is rather indicative of the couple’s power structure, demonstrating how “money and control of financial management traditionally have been associated with power in relationships” (Dolan and Stum, 1998: 357): his refusal to tell Freddie the truth is shown to stem from a fear that he might threaten Freddie’s self-esteem as the couple’s economic provider.

Freddie, however, has followed him since he left home and realises that he is working at the store. Far from feeling offended, he actually interprets Stuart’s secrecy as a sign of insecurity and inferiority: “Oh God, Stuart’s working here and he was too embarrassed to let me know. [...] Oh well, look at me, I’ve had my career, he’s just a shop girl, it’s clear he’s ashamed. After all, my opinion means the world to him. Now,

he can never know that I know” (17:31-17:55). Convinced that Stuart is ashamed of his job, Freddie resolves to feign ignorance and walks to Stuart and Violet pretending to believe that he is being cheated on: “So it’s true! [...] I’m very innocently buying swimming trunks for Ash while I think it’s all too clear what you’re doing. [...] You’re having an affair with this whore! [pointing at a customer]” (18:02-18:15). Stuart, on the other hand, believes Freddie is oblivious to his job and, though initially hesitant, decides to confirm his suspicions: “Alright, yes, I was considering having an affair” (18:30-18:33). He then asks for forgiveness, which Freddie pretends to concede unwillingly: it is curious how both Freddie and Stuart end up lying for the sake of each other’s self-esteem, to such an extent that the truth remains hidden throughout the rest of the episode. In the closing scene, Violet learns that Ash did know about Stuart’s job and stresses that “he did that because he wanted Freddie to think he’s still able to support them both. His acting work is not as frequent as it used to be, I’m afraid” (19:58-20:06). Her words underscore the couple’s struggles as well as Stuart’s resolve to help his partner. Before leaving for the *Doctor Who* screening, Stuart gives Freddie the coat he has been working for: even though their relationship does not seem to have changed and the problem is soon left behind, the episode serves to eloquently exemplify the conflicts stemming from the struggle to achieve financial well-being experienced by the couple without neglecting to depict them as remarkably active and, above all, resourceful.

Apart from bringing into stark relief the financial problems of the couple and Freddie’s need for reassertion, the episode clearly draws our attention to the power structure deriving from their roles within the couple. Even though, in “Cheat,” their power positions are addressed in a more light-hearted manner, other episodes explore

how such imbalances can also provoke financial unrest. Such conflicts are present right from the beginning of the series: for instance, in episode 1 (“Wake”), when Stuart learns that Clive was actually in love with him, he laments he did not read the letter at the time and wonders what his life with Clive would have been like. It is then that, feeling offended, Freddie stresses how well he has treated Stuart as well as his role as the provider in the relationship: “I provided you with everything you could ever want since the moment we met! You were pulling pints in a pub!” Stuart, then, defends himself by correcting Freddie: “I was the manager! And I was going to be a model” (15:35-15:45). Tensions continue to intensify throughout the gathering and Stuart ends up questioning Freddie’s achievements as an actor: “What exactly have you done with your life? Bit parts in rep and one episode of *Doctor Who*. What an illustrious career to look back on!” (18:53-19:00). Freddie counters Stuart’s remarks by referring to his lack of a career: “Well, at least I’ve had a career, and I’m still at it, I’m still working and you’ve had nothing, you’ve had nothing!” (19:00-19:06). His reaction to Stuart’s attack clearly highlights how, as Jeffrey P. Dew and Robert Stuart (2012: 47) argue, some individuals “may tie feelings of self-worth to their prowess as providers” and, “[i]f they do not feel that they receive the respect and appreciation from their spouse for these provider efforts, this may cause problems in relationships.” Even though the argument they have at the gathering is funnily resolved when, afterwards, Stuart emphasises that “I don’t see how we can ever get over this,” yet forgives Freddie the moment he says “[he’s] sorry” (21:22-21:30), the episode clearly serves to underscore how the roles Freddie and Stuart have adopted within their relationship constitute a strong, constant source of tension.

The connection between Freddie's dwindling job opportunities and the couple's subsequent power struggle is even better examined in episode 5, "Dinner Party." As the episode opens, Freddie asks Stuart if he has received any calls from his agent, to which Stuart replies: "No, he also hasn't called the 200 mornings before" (01:52-02:00). Stuart, however, notices Freddie's discomfort and asks him if he is feeling well. Freddie, then, reveals his insecurities concerning his situation: "It's just that I haven't worked for a while, and I'm a bit scared that perhaps I'm old..." (02:14-02:20). Not only is Freddie worried about his lack of work, but he is also concerned that his career might indeed be coming to an end. However, when Stuart invites him to discuss his problems, he is not willing to do so: "Of course I don't need to talk about it, so you can stop nagging me, and don't you dare mention it to anybody with your bizarrely tiny mouth either" (02:22-02:30). Even though much of the episode revolves around Ash's news that he has a new girlfriend, Chloe, whom they invite to dinner, the concerns expressed by Freddie in this scene, as we shall see, lay the groundwork for tensions that will arise in the dinner itself.

Later on in the episode, right before Ash and Chloe arrive at their flat, Stuart is accidentally trapped by the foot of a table while they are arranging the living room: it is then that the guests arrive and, ashamed to admit that he is not strong enough to liberate himself, Stuart asks Freddie not to tell them anything. Even though Stuart soon frees himself by chance, Freddie mocks him afterwards, ignoring Stuart's petition: "He put the table right down in his toe, and then he wouldn't let me tell you! What a moron, right?" (08:39-08:46). Annoyed that Freddie has unveiled his secret, Stuart attacks him by pinpointing the concerns he expressed early, telling the couple that "Freddie's scared he's never going to work again" (13:25-13:28) and stressing that "he only earned 300

pounds last month and that was a check for a cigarette commercial he did 47 years ago” (13:33-13:39). Even though their attacks never seem to develop into a serious argument, Freddie later counters Stuart again while having dinner, as if to reassert his superiority: upon realising there is no drink left in his glass, he asks Stuart why it is empty (17:03-17:06) and, when Stuart notes that “[he doesn’t] know” because “[he’s] not a waiter” (17:06-17:09), he replies: “You’re not? Because you were one when I met you!” (17:10-17:15). On the edge of his patience, Stuart warns Freddie to mind his behaviour: “watch it, Freddie, I’m warning you” (17:16-17:21). Their escalating tensions show, again, how, as researchers such as L.A. Kurdek (1994: 932) argue, same-sex relationships may also experience restraint as a result of finances and power, much like heterosexual couples.

While Ash is accustomed to the constant bickering that characterises Freddie and Stuart, the atmosphere does disturb his girlfriend, who begins to feel annoyed and behaves disrespectfully towards Freddie and Stuart. Not only does she describe them as “awful” (18:38) and does not believe that 22-year-old Ash can be friends with them (18:48) but, when she later argues with Ash over his lack of a clear vocation and Ash asks Freddie for reassurance that he can be anything he wants (19:35), she rudely attacks Freddie: “You’re really going to listen to this washed-up old actor that no one has even heard of?” (19:41-19:45). It is then that Stuart resolves to stand up and readily defends his partner:

Alright, that is quite enough. I’ll have you know that Freddie Thornhill has worked on the stage, screen and television for over 50 years. He’s had an extraordinary career. So what if he has hit a bit of a dry spell? He is by no means washed-up and never will be. So do not presume to tell us anything about our lives, young lady. We will not be talked down to in our own home. We’re accomplished men, quite capable of anything! (19:45-20:19)

Once Stuart has finished talking, Freddie shows the couple out, bringing the dinner to its end. Stuart's words in this scene emphasise how, in spite of their troubled financial situation and the power struggle that dominates much of their relationship, Freddie and Stuart are, again, ultimately proud and supportive of one another, as their reaction to the rude, ageist words of Ash's girlfriend display. The episode, therefore, offers a realistic portrayal of how relationships may become strained as a result of issues of money and power, yet Freddie and Stuart are ultimately portrayed in a positive light, displaying a positive sense of identity and a determination to continue fighting despite their age.

To sum up, as the exploration of the issue of financial fulfillment carried out in this section displays, *Vicious* provides an insightful picture of how financial issues can impact on couples regardless of their sexuality, stressing how Freddie and Stuart are affected, moreover, by their age group and the prospect of retirement. While one could contend that the series never dwells intensively on their struggles, fails to solve such issues with a proper sense of closure and does not consider factors that pertain to elderly gay men such as work discrimination due to their own sexuality (Espinoza, 2014: 15), it is still significant how Freddie and Stuart are portrayed in a realistic, yet ultimately positive manner: once again, the social dimension of the series is underscored, revealing itself as a comedy with a deeper social aim that speaks not only to audiences belonging to the same elderly, gay minority, but to society in general. Nevertheless, as mentioned earlier, *Vicious* is certainly imbued with a gay-oriented sensibility: I will now examine how such a sensibility contributes to a better understanding of the series' social message.

3.3. A Celebration of Identity: *Vicious*' Defence of Camp Sensibility

As the previous sections have demonstrated, *Vicious* is characterised by a clear social dimension, addressing problems that pertain to elderly gay men through the prism of humour. The series, however, has also been the recipient of a considerable deal of criticism, largely due to its dependence on old-fashioned jokes and, above all, on gay-related stereotypes. Such aspects, nevertheless, constitute an essential part of the camp sensibility that runs through the sitcom; thus, in the present section, I seek to analyse and defend *Vicious* as a camp text whose atmosphere is, in fact, very much in line with an ageing generation of gay men who found a means of expression and subversiveness in camp sensibility. My analysis of *Vicious* as a camp, essentially celebratory text will lead us to my concluding remarks on the sitcom's positive portrayal of elderly gay men.

At first glance, much of the camp mood that pervades the series stems from the deliberately old-fashioned, 70's-like flavour with which the episodes are imbued. In order to emulate this ambience, the sitcom relies extensively on repetitions¹⁵: examples include Stuart's phone call to his mother at the beginning of each episode, Freddie's descent through the stairs afterwards or their habit of asking Ash whether he has met Violet every time they coincide ("Wake," 13:19; "Cheat," 03:13; episode 3: "Audition," 03:38, 17:38; episode 4: "Clubbing," 4:40; "Dinner Party," 4:44, 15:28; "Anniversary," 2:14, 10:10), to the extent that, in the last episode, Ash notes that he certainly does, stressing that "[s]he practically gives [him] a handjob every time she says hello" (10:52). The setting also pays homage to the 70's by recreating a theatre-like atmosphere and by resorting to the audience's laughter to highlight funny scenes (even though, in *Vicious*,

¹⁵ For pictures illustrating the following examples, see the Appendix (images 1-13).

the laughter does come from a live studio audience, its strategic placement is clearly reminiscent of the canned laughter which, though still present in present-day sitcoms, has eventually come to be regarded as dated). The exaggerated, artificial ambiance of *Vicious* is much in line with Susan Sontag's exploration of the camp sensibility in her landmark 1964 essay *Notes on Camp*, in which she contends that "the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration" (1999: 53). The sitcom, then, does not seem to take itself too seriously: much like camp sensibility, *Vicious* "turns its back on the good-bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgment" (61) and "dethrones the serious" (62), becoming a series that refuses to abide by hegemonic notions of quality.

The camp sentiment that runs through the episodes, however, also stems greatly from the way in which the gay characters are depicted. Throughout the sitcom, Freddie and Stuart are rather open about their mannerisms, excessive gesturing and limp wrists¹⁶, thus illustrating Sontag's view that "[a]s a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated" (56), along with a marked "relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms" (56). Likewise, as we have seen, the sitcom is seething with instances of witty, acid bickering between the couple –for instance, when Stuart boasts that "[he has] been to Oxford" in "Wake," Freddie sarcastically answers: "Yes, for lunch" (01:20-01:23)– a means of expression that is often accompanied by feminising expressions: for instance, upon seeing that Freddie is not helping him organise the anniversary party, Stuart calls him a "big bitch" ("Anniversary," 05:09); similarly, when Stuart refuses to talk to Freddie due to an argument in episode 1, Freddie expresses his surprise when Stuart resumes talking to him by exclaiming "she speaks!" (21:00). While Sontag stresses that the camp and

¹⁶ For pictures displaying their body language and gesturing, see the Appendix (images 14-21).

gay sensibilities are not necessarily linked, she does acknowledge that “there is [...] a peculiar affinity and overlap” (64), to such an extent that camp can be seen as “a gesture of self-legitimization” among homosexuals: it is precisely in the gay-oriented sensibility denoted by the aforementioned aspects –and so reminiscent of camp films such as *La cage aux folles* (1978)– that the essence of the series resides. Such is the significance of its camp foundations that it was originally entitled *Vicious Old Queens*, a title that was later shortened to *Vicious* at the request of Ian McKellen, who did not want the title to include references to age (Walker, 2013: website). Though intentional, however, these details have aroused much criticism concerning the series’ depiction of elderly gay men.

Despite the series’ ambitious cast and its innovative premise as a sitcom dealing with a hitherto overlooked minority, its camp feeling soon became the main recipient of attention: while some critics praised the sitcom’s nostalgic humour and progressive choice of characters, to such an extent that Keith Watson from *Metro* (2013: website) hailed it as “a sign of how far sexual liberation has come,” others argued that the mannerisms of McKellen and Jacobi did not do justice to the project. For instance, Sam Wollaston from *The Guardian* (2013: website) remarked that McKellen and Jacobi are “caricatures of themselves” that have been “camped up to the max” while, in his review for *The London Evening Standard*, Brian Sewell (2013: website) goes even further and describes *Vicious* as “a spiteful parody that could not have been nastier had it been devised and written by a malevolent and recriminatory heterosexual,” adding that it “embod[ies] an older meaning of the [title] word –morally reprehensive, injurious.” As these remarks display, the camp-infused nature of the series has been regarded as a notable flaw, striking critics as pejorative and stereotypical. Critics, however, seem to

overlook the social implications camp entails within the context of elderly gay men. Rather than offer a negative, stereotyped image of elderly gay men, *Vicious* draws on camp codes of behaviour to celebrate a means of expression that, as I shall discuss now, was key at a time of restraint: in that sense, the sitcom conveys a message of pride.

Even though, as mentioned earlier, Sontag does pinpoint a connection between homosexuality and camp sensibility, she ultimately downplays the compromised side of the genre when she describes it as “disengaged, depoliticized –or at least apolitical” (54). One could argue that Sontag’s failure to consider the political dimension of camp is justified in a pre-Stonewall world where social awareness of homosexual rights was still beginning to surface: however, as Daniel Horowitz (2012: 332-33) notes, the truth is that camp sensibility already played a remarkable part in gay and lesbian activism, which was active long before the game-changing Stonewall riots broke out in 1969. Not only did camp constitute a subversive, celebratory code within the gay community but, as Bryan J. Lowder (2013: website) remarks, it even came to be regarded as “a means affording gays a method of societal integration via a kind of comic minstrelsy for straights,” thereby becoming a powerful means of resistance against a heteronormative society in certain cases. Critics such as Midge Decter (1980: website) have gone even further, regarding camp as “a brilliant expression of homosexual aggression against the heterosexual world [...] serving the purpose of domination by ridicule.” While Decter’s claim is clearly exaggerated, the fact remains that camp does indeed entail implications of subversiveness, serving as a code of evasion and resistance in a society in which they were “the other.” Consequently, it is not far-fetched that, as elderly gay men, Freddie and Stuart should continue to employ the codes that sheltered them from such a society.

It is, then, within this context that their mannerisms and acid bickering must be understood: rather than traffic in gay stereotypes, Freddie and Stuart simply celebrate who they are as survivors of social and legal homophobia. Once again, Gary Janetti defends the sitcom in his interview with *Slate* (in Thomas, 2014: website), arguing that, despite the criticisms the series has received, it must be kept in mind that “[w]hat [men such as Freddie and Stuart] had to deal with in the ‘60s is why [he] can be where [he is] now.” He then goes on to underscore what such men experienced in their youths:

It’s so easy to say the men of that generation are too camp. What men of that generation had to go through when they were in their 20s, to swim against the tide, to not get married, to not pretend you have a girlfriend. Being gay was against the law; you could have gone to jail. These aren’t things we discuss, because it’s a sitcom, but it’s implicit.

Later on in the interview, Janetti further emphasises how important it is for gay men to be able to express themselves in the face of social repression: as he notes, “[w]e grew up having to tamp down certain things. I spent so many years when I couldn’t gesture too much because of how it seemed, having to conform. So, yes, there are some camp elements to them, *but there’s no mincing, there’s a dignity*” (emphasis added). Mark Ravenhill (in Preston, 2013: website) has also addressed the criticisms of the series’ portrayal of gay men by noting that, in fact, “[i]t’s a sign of how far things have come that you can write something with that degree of malevolence,” adding that there might, consequently, be an “element of truth” in Brian Sewell’s aforementioned remarks. Even members of the cast such as McKellen have spoken in favour of camp men, noting that it would be a mistake on the part of the audience to assume that they are mere stereotypes. As he notes in his interview with *Attitude* (in Button, 2015: website):

We know some gay people don’t like camp gay people. Well [...] grow up! We’re around. We exist. Derek [Jacobi] lards Stuart with that campness at times, when required, but he’s

no more camp than what you'd see in many a corner shop. There are people like that and for other gay people who act more straight to deny that we're brothers is something I find offensive. Some people are very, very camp and for god's sake, some of those camp people are straight. It's the variety of life.

His call for open-mindedness, in a way, summarises why the series has been so heavily criticised, pinpointing the audience's failure to acknowledge that the men portrayed in the sitcom indeed exist as well as the tendency to assume that all gay men must behave in a similar fashion, thus challenging heteronormative standards of behaviour. *Vicious*, then, is meant to be viewed as an example of sexual liberty in which the characters are not afraid to be themselves, rather than as a pejorative portrayal of elderly gay men. While one could argue that the series' portrayal of gay men enables homophobic people to further revel in their discriminative beliefs and, to a certain extent, the series itself fails to properly show the diversity it so firmly champions (after all, Freddie and Stuart constitute the only depictions of gay men in the series, which, in a way, contradicts McKellen's claim for diversity), the fact remains that, in this context, camp sensibility becomes a powerful statement of identity, exalting a kind of sensibility that was crucial to a generation of homosexual men who now celebrate their survival in a hostile world.

All things considered, it can be said with certainty that the camp ambiance that characterises *Vicious* is not only achieved purposefully, but entails implications of self-assertion and identity that are important within the context of the sitcom. While it is true that the series may strike viewers as old-fashioned and the characters may be viewed as stereotyped, it must be kept in mind that, after all, the series pays homage to old-school sitcoms and, most importantly, to a code of behaviour to which many men resorted in the face of repression. In so doing, the sitcom also makes an eloquent call for diversity, urging us not to interpret the series as homophobic but, rather, as a celebratory and very

much endearing statement of identity. *Vicious*, then, champions the identity of men who, in spite of their stigmatised past, take great pride in themselves, using humour as a way to raise awareness about a part of society that remains overlooked in present-day media.

4. Still a Long Way to Go: Concluding Remarks and Further Research

The two texts I have examined throughout this dissertation are, on the outside, radically different: while *Father of Frankenstein* explores the darkest confines of James Whale's psyche as he struggles to interrupt the process by which he is losing himself, *Vicious* provides a more light-hearted portrayal of elderly gay men, ushering us through the lives of the witty, lively and unashamedly campish Freddie and Stuart. Both texts, however, ultimately converge in two crucial aspects: they both draw our attention to an often overlooked population of elderly gay men and, most importantly, they challenge derogative conceptions of what it means to be both old and gay. While, in *Father of Frankenstein*, Whale takes control over his life and frees himself from his state of mental deterioration by willingly choosing to put an end to his existence, *Vicious* displays, through the prism of humour, how Freddie and Stuart lead an active life and ultimately remain optimistic in a society where, despite social binds, they are survivors.

The clear differences existing between the texts I have chosen also contribute to the subversion of prejudiced images of elderly gay men, illustrating the diverse nature of this grouping and, in so doing, compelling us not to make the mistake of assuming that minorities consist of like-minded individuals who abide by stereotyped patterns of conduct. An eloquent example of how the two portrayals differ from, yet ultimately complement one another can be found in the way masculinities are addressed in both texts: while Bram succeeds in blurring the barrier that delineates heterosexual and homosexual models of masculinity in *Father of Frankenstein* by exploring Whale's status as a self-made man and his choice to commit suicide, *Vicious* dares to transgress such barriers more radically and, through its camp-infused representation of characters,

defies expectations as to what is masculine and what is feminine. Even though *Father of Frankenstein* adopts a safer, more heteronormative approach which, in part, explains the mainstream acclaim *Gods and Monsters* received (despite the fact that, ironically, the film also stars Ian McKellen), *Vicious* entails a statement of identity that must also be exalted, depicting two men who bravely embrace their historically repressed identities.

Apart from displaying distinct, yet perfectly compatible portrayals of elderly gay men, *Father of Frankenstein* and *Vicious* are also remarkable for addressing issues that pertain to members of society in general terms. Rather than revolve exclusively around the sexuality of the characters, both texts also concentrate on other aspects (e.g. Whale's growing dependency and suicide, or Freddie and Stuart's economic struggles and power dynamics) without neglecting to stress sexuality as a part of their identities. The texts, therefore, do emphasise the fact that elderly gay men are little different from any other human being, carefully placing emphasis on universal issues with which any reader or spectator can identify; however, there is also a clear element of identity attached to the sexuality of the characters that, given the society in which they lived, cannot be ignored. A balance, then, is attained between strictly sexual and more general, universal issues.

While it is evident that both *Father of Frankenstein* and *Vicious* are innovative texts in that they delve deeply into aspects of great importance to a generally overlooked minority, it must also be kept in mind that these texts also fail to delve more deeply into other issues. To start with, as I emphasised in the introduction, the portrayals I have analysed throughout this dissertation are generally privileged by both their social class and race: consequently, more portrayals exploring the intersections of homosexuality and issues of class or race have yet to surface and be examined. Likewise, many other

issues of importance to elderly gay men remain generally unexplored in these texts: topics that have yet to be addressed include, for instance, intergenerational relationships within the LGBT community, exploring how elderly gay men (and LGBT elders at large) feel neglected by a community obsessed with youth and beauty, or the concerns experienced by LGBT elders when it comes to medical services, among other possibilities. Given the reduced number of works dealing with this grouping, it is only logical that many issues still remain uncharted: however, the growing visibility of LGBT elders as new generations reach old age suggests that, in time, these and other topics might be explored in more depth.

The analysis I have carried out in this dissertation, moreover, leads us to other questions that also need to be considered for further research, emphasising the need to palliate the lack of investigation on this demographic that I pinpointed earlier. An aspect that merits further attention, for instance, is the extent to which elderly gay men are affected by the insularity with which they have co-existed owing to social and legal repression. Even though *Vicious* does explore this issue peripherally through, for instance, Freddie and Stuart's use of curtains, emphasis is rarely placed on how they interact with the outside world: it would, therefore, be informative to delve deeper into the relationship between this collective and a society where they have historically been threatened. Similarly, the relationship between elderly gay men and the new generations (both heterosexual or LGBT) also requires research: while both *Father of Frankenstein* and *Vicious* prove that intergenerational bonding is possible, the relationship between Whale, Freddie and Stuart and a youth-centred world remains limited, revealing gaps in research that would enable us to acquire a better understanding of their situation.

Needless to say, more attention must also be paid to other elder members of the LGBT community, not simply elderly gay men. For instance, the past few months have witnessed the emergence of various mainstream portrayals of elder transgender women. An interesting case is that of Caitlyn Jenner (born in 1949), formerly known as the Olympic Champion William Bruce Jenner: having felt trapped in the body of a man for decades, it was not until very recently, at the age of 65, that Jenner decided to publicly come out as a transgender woman. A similar, though fictional example can be found in the recent TV series *Transparent* (2014-), which recounts the life of Maura Pfefferman (born Morton L. Pfefferman), a retired university teacher who finally decides to come out as a transgender woman in old age. As both examples demonstrate, the increasingly open-minded nature of our society may also encourage transgender elders to embrace their true identities after a lifetime of self-denial or secrecy, a decision that, needless to say, implies consequences within their environment: similar patterns of behaviour can, likewise, be found in bisexual or lesbian elders. Research, then, must be conducted to better understand how other elderly LGBT collectives inhabit (and adapt to) present-day society. These and many other possibilities remain, as of yet, largely unexplored in the field of the humanities: it is, consequently, high time researchers sought to mirror the increasing amount of investigation conducted in the fields of sociology and psychology.

As the previous paragraphs stress, much still needs to be done regarding research on LGBT elders. Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to make a contribution to this area of research, hoping to locate elderly gay men on the map in an ageist and still homophobic world where they remain clearly stigmatised. This struggle for visibility is similarly defended by the texts I have analysed: by providing empowering depictions of

elderly gay men within such a hostile context, both *Father of Frankenstein* and *Vicious* also reveal themselves as positive, empowering claims for visibility, aiming to address a gap in present-day media and research that can no longer be overlooked. To end on a positive note, it could be argued that the existence of such texts is, in a way, indicative of the changes society is now undergoing: despite a past of repression, elderly gay men (among other LGBT elders) are beginning to gain visibility (however little) in the media, claiming relevance as well as acceptance. We might, then, start broadening our horizons.

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6. Appendix: Selected Images from *Vicious*



Image 1 (Episode 1: "Wake," 00:29)



Image 2 (Episode 2: "Cheat," 00:35)



Image 3 (Episode 3: “Audition,” 00:43)



Image 4 (Episode 4: “Clubbing,” 00:31)

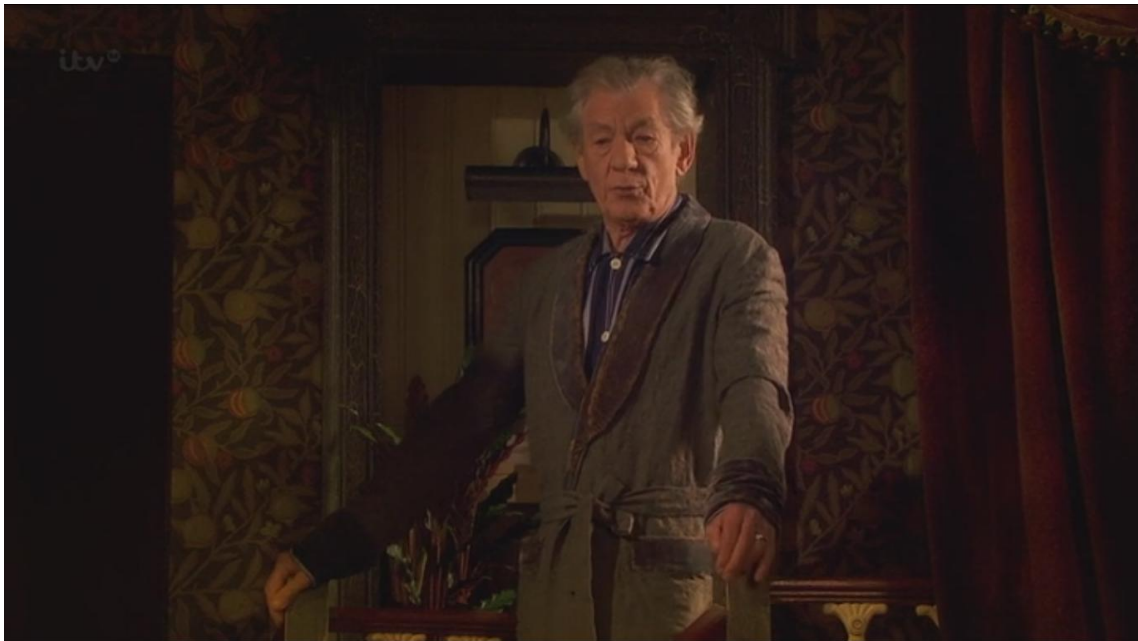


Image 5 (Episode 1: “Wake,” 01:07)



Image 6 (Episode 3: “Audition,” 0:55)



Image 7 (Episode 4: "Clubbing," 01:08)



Image 8 (Episode 4: "Clubbing," 07:09)



Image 9 (Episode 6: “Anniversary,” 07:05)



Image 10 (Episode 1: “Wake,” 13:19)



Image 11 (Episode 2: “Cheat,” 03:13)



Image 12 (Episode 3: “Audition,” 17:36)



Image 13 (Episode 4: “Clubbing,” 04:41)



Image 14 (Episode 1: “Wake,” 01:53)



Image 15 (Episode 1: “Wake,” 05:32)



Image 16 (Episode 1: “Wake,” 15:45)



Image 17 (Episode 1: “Wake,” 15:33)



Image 18 (Episode 2: “Cheat,” 12:41)



Image 19 (Episode 3: “Audition,” 04:23)



Image 20 (Episode 4: “Clubbing,” 03:24)



Image 21 (Episode 5: “Dinner Party,” 03:27)